Contemporary Islamic Thought and the Re-emergence of the Qurʾān As Foundational Text

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the status of the Qur'ān in contemporary Islamic thought at the point of intersection with the philosophical discourses of modernity and postmodernity. As a marginal discourse, Islamic thought has had to seek legitimacy in light of the dominant paradigms of modernity and postmodernity. It is argued that through active engagement and critique of the dominant paradigms, Islamic discourse is able to articulate a much more vivid portrait of its authentic-self. This self-portrait is shaped by dissenting voices within the Western philosophical tradition critical of modernity and postmodernity, as well as by voices from the Islamic intellectual tradition. The role of the Qur'ān as foundational text is approached by questioning the status and source of values in both the Western and the Islamic traditions. It is consequently argued that the moral categories of right and wrong, or good and bad, are necessarily ontological in Islam and are informed by the Qur'ān. The role of the Qur'ān as foundational text is thus affirmed from this perspective. Finally, the mechanism through which the Qur'ān is able to convey its ethical imperative is explored. In this regard, it is argued that the Qur'ān is performative in nature and that its moral ethos is conveyed by a dialogic process. The conclusion suggests that the re-emergence of a religious slant in social discourse is of marked significance, especially at a time in which secular philosophy is being cogently challenged. This study is therefore an apt example of a new and important focal point in the social sciences.

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INTRODUCTION

When a person utters the creedal statement of Islam – bearing witness that there is no Divinity except God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God – he has essentially done two things. Firstly, he has rooted his existence and being in terms of an external locus to whose authority he submits. Secondly, he has laid claim to a certain belief that he holds to be true. The ontological consciousness of the individual, in the first instance, ultimately rests on faith. His sense of being undoubtedly impacts upon every aspect of his life but he is at liberty to determine what he chooses to believe simply on whim or fancy. However, at some point or another he is required to justify his beliefs for himself and for others. He has to furnish proof for that which he holds to be true. Therefore, even faith (*ʾImān*) rests upon the bedrock of knowledge (*ʿIlm*).

Far from being the innocent godchild of faith, knowledge in itself is a complicated enterprise. Epistemology, one of the most prominent branches of philosophy, solely concerns itself with the nature, sources, limits and justifications of what comprises knowledge and what does not. Ontology (sense of being) and epistemology (justification of being) are two branches of philosophy that are inextricably linked. For a Muslim, this becomes most evident when pondering over the Qurʾān. In the ontological sense, the Qurʾān is the transcendental voice that constantly engages the believer in a manner that convinces him to act in accordance with its directives. In the epistemological sense, it serves as an inspiration and a source of knowledge and guidance.

While the ontological status of the Qur'ān can hardly be questionable for the believer, resting – as it does – on faith, its epistemological status most certainly can (and has been) questioned. Scholars from within and beyond the fold of Islam have posed vexing questions concerning the nature and status of the Qur'ān. Those within the Islamic camp have debated the epistemological status of the Qur'ān from a very early stage in Muslim history. The perennial question proffered in this regard is whether revelation is to be given primacy over reason, or whether reason reigns supreme. In more recent times scholars have raised issues around the historicity of the text. A typical argument of this type suggests that the Qur'ān is a product of a certain socio-historical milieu accorded divine status for the purpose of political expediency. As such, any knowledge claims emanating from the text are hardly worth considering. These examples are but a sample of a broad range of inquiries that engage the Qur'ān from an epistemological perspective. The number of contemporary studies in this field, in both English and Arabic, has shown a steady increase.[1] To deny the validity of the Qur'ān as an epistemological category is tantamount to subverting not only its authority but its ontological status as well, because mere belief without justification is no more than wishful fantasy. This is perhaps one compelling reason explaining why greater attention has been accorded to epistemological concerns.

In contrast, very sparse attention has been paid to the study of the Qur'ānic phenomenon from an ontological perspective. This is therefore one of the problems that this study will address. Focusing upon the reception of the Qur'ān by Muslims as beings-in-the-world, ontologically that is, presents a far more accurate benchmark of how Islam as an ideal is reconciled with the challenges of lived experience. Consequently, serious consideration has to be accorded to the fact that the space

between the 'Islam that is' and the 'Islam that ought to be" is occupied by influences that transform the conscientious affirmation and expression of authentic Islam into an existential endeavour, always in flux. Some of these influences are potentially subversive and serve to undermine the very basis of religion, while others act as catalysts to stimulate positive engagement with Islam in a vibrant way. The most powerful of these influences in the present age have been the philosophical discourses of modernity and postmodernity.

The encounter between Islam, modernity, and postmodernity has without a doubt influenced the way in which Muslims give expression to their religion, but more intimately, it has also shaped the way in which they have responded to and received the Qur'ān. These influences cannot be construed of in exclusively negative terms. The challenges that Muslims have faced in engaging the Qur'ān before Islam's encounter with modernity have indeed been many. The most positive development arising out of the encounter between Islamic thought and the discourses of modernity and postmodernity has been the impetus provided for deep introspection. In brief, these are the main concerns that will be addressed in this study and which must now be explicitly articulated.

1. Aims and Objectives

This study proposes to analyse the position and status of the Qur'ān with reference to the philosophical discourses of modernity and postmodernity. More specifically, it aims to address the engagement between modernity, postmodernity, and contemporary Islamic thought so as to examine how this has influenced the re-emergent status of the Qur'ān as foundational text. The study therefore attempts to

provide valuable insight into how Muslims reconcile the challenge of remaining faithful to beliefs held to be eternally valid - and which are contained in the Qur'ān – and the demands of a world constantly in motion.

Before proceeding further, something must be said about the notion of the foundational text, a metaphor that applies specifically to the discourses of Islam and modernity. Modernist discourse has been strongly equated with the philosophical doctrine of foundationalism, which argues that knowledge is ultimately based on beliefs that require no further justification.[2] These foundational beliefs have been taken as those that are certain and beyond doubt. Consequently, the Qur'ān fits the description of foundational text (from an Islamic perspective) because it is accorded infallible status due to its divine origins. Modernist discourse, in contrast, has accorded the status of foundational text to reason, because it is the faculty that determines the logical truths that require no further justification.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, is best described as anti-foundationalist. This is a broad term used to describe a discourse that problematizes absolute categorisations. Anti-foundationalism would favour relativism over absolute truth or scepticism over claims of objectivity. Islamic discourse, like modernist discourse, not only accepts, but also presupposes the existence of basic self-evident truths or universal proposals. The foundationalist/anti-foundationalist debate covers a very broad spectrum in philosophical literature but will be used in this study in the manner just described, and elaborated upon in the study where necessary.

2. *Delimitations*

Although the central focus of this study is the Qurʾān, the approach adopted is one that focuses on the theoretical concerns that address the way in which the Qurʾān has been conceived of and received. As such, not much reference is made to the contents of the Qurʾān itself, and it is assumed that the reader has some familiarity with its basic teachings and themes.

Another prominent feature of the study is that it addresses many issues that are normally associated with the study of philosophy. This has necessitated explaining some of the philosophical arguments in detail, which sometimes required taking recourse to extensive quotes. The advantage of using direct quotes over paraphrasing is that it conveys the subtlety of the view being argued without the risk of misappropriating the author's intent.

A final consideration to bear in mind is that even though the study at times seriously engages contemporary debates in philosophy, these debates are not the central focus of what is being argued and the reader unfamiliar with the current literature in the field may inadvertently be disadvantaged. In contrast, the specialist in the field of philosophy might find some of the argumentation laborious. This is unfortunately the consequence of having to straddle two very distinct disciplines.

3. *The Importance of the Study*

This study is seen as contributing towards the reconstruction of Islamic thought within a contemporary paradigm. This is attempted by expressing the philosophical foundations of the Islamic paradigm in the language of contemporary discourse. In

doing so, this paradigm can be measured by interrogating it with opposing paradigms articulated in the same language.

The study is, as such, of considerable importance because it facilitates dialogue between classical and contemporary paradigms by expressing the old in terms of the new. This importance is twofold, impacting upon both theory and praxis. Theoretically, it establishes new horizons of understanding by transcending classical paradigms. Practically, this new understanding is ultimately manifested in the way people live and practice their faith.

The emphasis that the study places upon ontology is also of importance. The study thereby provides us with tools for the analysis of metanarratives by extracting and isolating the ontological underpinnings of the thought paradigms under focus. In other words, the study exposes the methodologies that are used for the production of these particular discourses. This not only sheds clearer light upon the Western philosophical tradition, but upon Islamic thought as well.

4. A Brief Overview

The first chapter of the study will examine the encounter between Islam, modernity and postmodernity and should serve as an important precursor to the chapters thereafter.

In chapter two an attempt will be made to identify the essential underpinnings of the Islamic paradigm, in contrast with the dominant Western-secular paradigm that serves as a conduit for the discourses of modernity and postmodernity.

In chapter three, attention will be given to analysing the impact of these various influences upon the reception of the Qurʾān by Muslims living in a modern and ever-changing world.

The general conclusion that follows will attempt to tie together the various aspects of the study as a whole.

Endnotes

[1] The following list is a significant representative sample of works on Islamic Epistemology:
Aḥmed ʿUmar, I. (1992) *al-ʿIlm wa al-ʾImān - Madkhal ʾIla Naẓriah al-Mʿarifah fi al-Islām* (Herndon, Virginia, International Institute of Islamic Thought).

al-Kurdi, R. (1992) *Naẓriah al-Mʿarifah bayna al- Qurʾān wa al-Falsafah* (Herndon, Virginia, International Institute of Islamic Thought).

al-Zaydān, ʿA. (1992) *Maṣādir al-Mʿarifah fi al-Fikr al-Dīni wa al-Falsafi - Dirāsah Naqdīyah fi Daw al-Islām* (Herndon, Virginia, International Institute of Islamic Thought).

Rosenthal, F. (1970) *Knowledge Truimphant - The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, E. J. Brill).

Yazdi, M. H. (1992) *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy - Knowledge by Prescence* (Albany, State University of New York Press).

Safi, L. M. (1997) Towards an Islamic Theory of Knowledge, *Islamic Studies*, 36(1), 39-56.

[2] *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (2000), T. MAUTNER, Ed., p. 206 (London, Penguin).

CHAPTER ONE

Cogito Ergo Sum (I think, therefore I am) – **Rene' Descartes**[1]

Il n'y a pas de hors texte (There exists nothing outside of texts) – **Jacques Derrida**[2]

Islam and human nature emanate from one niche. He who has created Humanity has also revealed to them the Qur'ān – **Sheikh Rachid al-Ghannouchi**[3]

1. Introduction

Religious prophecies, revolutionary systems of thought, even strange ideas, all seem destined to find expression within the social collective, influencing the way people live, die, and interact. Ideas sometimes wreak havoc in the societies in which they take root. At other times they act as agents of tremendous enlightenment and change. Islamic thought is characterised by many such high and low points. The three opening epigraphs aptly reflect this and may be viewed as signposts marking the fault lines on the current intellectual landscape of Islam. Descartes is widely acknowledged as the father of modernity, while Derrida is acclaimed as one of the *infante terrible* of postmodernity. In contemporary times, al-Ghannouchi speaks in the name of resurgent Islam striving to reclaim its authenticity.

In this chapter I will outline how current Islamic thought has been impacted upon by the intellectual discourses of modernity and postmodernity. I will proceed from the inception of modernity and go on to discuss developments in the postmodern period. In my final analysis I will discuss contemporary Islamic thought and the discontents of modernity and postmodernity. This has necessitated taking recourse to the work of current-day Islamist

thinkers who have responded to the intellectual challenges of modernity and postmodernity. These thinkers strive to assert the superiority of the Islamic alternative over the dominant Western-secular discourses. The Secular / Islamist polemic is an essential contributing factor to the emergence of a clearer conception of Islamic identity in current times. The issue of identity will be sufficiently addressed in the next chapter, but attention must now be turned to the philosophical discourses of modernity and postmodernity, in order to lay the necessary groundwork.

2. Islamic Thought and Modernity

Before considering the relationship between Islamic thought and modernity, it is important to briefly survey the background that gave rise to modernity. This should place us in a position to satisfactorily appreciate the aspirations and disappointments invoked by this important paradigm of thought.

2.1 The rise of modernity in the West

It is generally contended that the roots of Modernity as a philosophical discourse can be traced back to the period of the Enlightenment. In the Middle Ages, prior to the Enlightenment, Europe was gripped in the clutches of an intense struggle between science and religion. The discoveries of great figures like Kepler, Copernicus, Gilbert and Galileo provided a basis on which to challenge traditional religious worldviews concerning the nature of the universe. The price paid for challenging religious cosmological doctrines was very high. Galileo, for example, faced persecution for positing scientific theories that ran contrary to the religious dogma of the Catholic Church.[4] However, the changing tides ensured that the tyrannical rule of the church did not last much longer.

The Enlightenment marked a decisive epistemological break from the thought paradigm of the Middle Ages. The Christian Church's hegemony over institutions of knowledge and its power to determine the very nature of knowledge was now being challenged. The central role of religious ideas in politics was also brought into question. The Enlightenment thus emerged as a "critique of the social systems and philosophical traditions which characterised the Middle Ages".[5] Within the broader spectrum of world history these changes were as significant as the classical Graeco-Roman outlook (which flourished up to the fourth century AD) and the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire. The emergent Christian worldview replaced the Graeco-Roman outlook and proceeded to dominate Europe until the seventeenth century.[6]

With the onset of the eighteenth century modern ideas and arguments that came to the fore shifted the focus of the Looking Glass. Philosophers now began to openly scrutinise the worldview of the church. The Enlightenment also became known as the *age of reason* because the philosophy of that time emphasised reason and rationality over the speculative theology of the church. Rationalism and empiricism were now core elements of epistemology, displacing speculative and theological metaphysics.[7] Concepts like Reason, Empiricism, Science, Universalism, Progress, Individualism, Tolerance, Freedom, Uniformity of Human Nature, and Secularism, resonate throughout this period.[8] These major themes form the very core of philosophical modernity and are still invoked today.

Thus, the Enlightenment removed religion as principle and base of identity and replaced it with reason. Human worth was now measured in terms of ethics and utility rather than creed and piety.[9] In return for a compromise on faith, modernity was able to rekindle the imagination and instil confidence in the ability of the subjective-self. Modernity rewarded

humankind's spiritual loss with material gain. The scientific advances made in the last four centuries surpassed the collective efforts of every epoch preceding it. In spite of the material success of the Enlightenment, the philosophy that it had conceived would exact an extremely costly toll on humanity later on in history. The darker side of modernity shadowed a culture of suffering and genocide.

2.2 The Muslim world before the Enlightenment

Developments in the Muslim world were by no means as drastic. Foremostly, there was no fundamental epistemological shift from a hegemonic religious paradigm to a militantly rationalist one. Science, Reason and Religion co-existed in a relatively peaceful relationship. As early as the twelfth century the great philosopher of Islam, Abu-Hāmid al-Ghazāli, advocated the view that the best of sciences were those that combined transmitted (religious) knowledge with rational knowledge and where revelation is accompanied by opinion.[10] The kind of issues that fired controversy and accusations of heresy in the Muslim world concerned speculative theology and not Science. Al-Ghazāli himself levelled charges of disbelief against Muslim philosophers on account of their denials of physical resurrection, God's knowledge of particulars and creation *ex-nihilo*.

In terms of scientific discovery the Dark Ages of Europe were a time of illumination in the Muslim world. Philosophy as well as the natural sciences was pursued with vigour. Although the advances that were made in this period served as an important foundation for the European Enlightenment, there was no sharp turn upward towards great breakthroughs.[11] Consequently, the discoveries of the West enabled it to transcend the geographic confines of Europe and reverberations were soon felt throughout the world. Famous centres of learning in

the Islamic world were surpassed by their Western counterparts. With the onset of modernity history witnessed the emergence of the West as a new World Power.

2.3 Modernity and Western hegemony

Scientific advances in the West granted it dominance second to none. Along with material superiority came power, followed by a tremendous thirst for conquest. The military force of the West easily satiated its territorial appetite and in a relatively short period of time two-thirds of the world was colonised by it. Military colonisation was inevitably accompanied by cultural invasion that proved to be far more exacting. The intellectual and cultural heritage of Islam – along with that of other civilisations – was forced into dormancy.

While scholars have argued that the world had been disenchanted – freed from superstitious, mythical beliefs – by Western modernity, one can say with certainty that the West was simultaneously enchanting the rest of the world. By the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire awakened to the changing world realities and embarked upon a systematic and comprehensive programme of modernisation. The bitter reality was that the newly emerging world was not that of the *ʿulamā*; its languages were French, Italian and English, and its logic, idioms and methods were all equally foreign to Muslims.[12] Such desperate attempts at modernisation only served to emphasise the superiority of the West over the Muslim world. Not only did Muslims imitate the West in its methods of governance but it also began imbibing its very philosophy of living.

The fact that Western modernity was a product of a very specific and unique experience is lost to such attempts at imitation. The impact of these imitative attempts is what is still being grappled with today. Islamic thought is now permeated with a philosophy that has entered

from without. It may be argued that this is not unique in any way and that no philosophy remains untouched by syncretism. However, the failure or success of such conflations depends entirely on whether any common ground exists between very distinct paradigms. Tensions are bound to arise in any endeavour that hopes to mix the unmixable. In spite of these tensions, there are always those who are willing to attempt such a rapprochement. Thus, the relationship between contemporary Islamic discourse and modernity will now be considered so as to gauge the impact of such attempts.

2.4 Modernity and contemporary Islamic thought

It is important at this point to differentiate between modernisation and modernity. Modernisation refers to the introduction into society of artefacts of contemporary life such as new technology in transport, communication, etc. In contrast, modernity is a general term for the political and cultural process set in motion by integrating new ideas into society. It is a way of thought and living. However, modernisation is the process that normally leads to modernity. The beginnings of modernity are characterised by attitudes of enquiry into how people make choices, be they moral, personal, economic, or political. In other words, rational choice becomes central to modern men and women.[13] In the nineteenth century the West advocated and firmly believed in the inevitability of progress and the power of human reason.[14] The western mindset made a clear break with the past and maintained a strong forward-looking orientation. Ideas of God and transcendence slowly became fading memories.

The attraction of modernity invoked varying responses from Muslim intellectuals. The Muslim mindset, in contrast, was strongly attached to a glorious past and could not easily break away from its roots. It still maintained a positively atavistic posture.[15] Upon reflection,

one is able to empathise with such a position. For Muslim intellectuals of the early twentieth century Islam still had much to offer in terms of its philosophical orientation and depth. Even though modernity had given the West the upper hand in terms of material progress, this was by no means reason enough to dismiss the Islamic worldview all together.

This sentiment finds full expression in the thought of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghāni. For al-Afghāni, Islam was foremost a belief in the transcendence of God *and* in reason.[16] At a very early stage, al-Afghāni had realised that reason alone was not sufficient for humankind's prosperity. Although he enjoined embracing modernity, he remained weary of the strains it placed upon religion. His disciple Muhammad ʿAbduh followed a similar trajectory. ʿAbduh asked how the gap between Islam and modernity could be bridged and answered that Muslims had to accept the need for change based on the principles of Islam.[17] This tradition of engaging modernity was continued by the likes of Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. More recent scholars like the late Muhammad al-Ghazāli contended that certain elements of the modern West had to be accepted, but there are certain philosophical standpoints that are unacceptable to Islam.[18]

All the above intellectuals represent an engagement with modernity that is more or less critical. Such expressions were inevitably labelled fundamentalist and enjoyed little credibility amongst those that strongly upheld and embraced modernity. In view of the broader scope of social discourse voices of resurgent Islam were seen as no more than intellectual aberrations. A dominant Western discourse still preached the doctrine of modernity with full confidence. This would not continue indefinitely and the rise of postmodernity gave legitimacy to many divergent voices, including that of Islam's. However,

it is imperative that we consider modernist trends within the Islamic tradition before moving on to discuss postmodernity and the rise of critical alternatives to modernity.

As suggested, many Muslim scholars were willing to embrace modernity far more warmly. In most cases this involved making substantial adjustments to traditionally held views. I will consider the case of one such scholar, Bassam Tibi, in order to represent this position. There are naturally as many opinions on the project of modernity as there are scholars engaged in its study. It would be naïve as such to treat the entire spectrum of discourse as homogenous and static. However, there are certain trends that can be assumed to be representative of a mainstream position. Tibi's discourse consequently emerges as a good general reflection on modernity because he assumes an overtly apologetic posture towards it. He is therefore well placed for the expressed purpose of drawing out the contrast between Islam and modernity.

Tibi has published several works related to Islam and modernity.[19] For him, the European project of modernity is normative in terms of determining what constitutes knowledge.[20] He not only affirms the aims of the Enlightenment project but also regards them as necessary for progress and development. I will outline some of the philosophical implications of modernity and link them to Tibi's thought before going into a detailed exposition of his views. I will thereafter consider criticisms of this position. This should lead us to a general critique of modernity.

For Tibi, modernity is a cultural project that triggered off a man-centred secular worldview and as such an insight into the capability of man to know and to change his social environment autonomously, regardless of supernatural forces such as God's will.[21] On this

basis he asserts that modernity, as an epistemology, is a French achievement inspired by Rene' Descartes. In this regard,

> the Cartesian view of the world, as an objective entity, corresponds with man's discovery of his own capability to establish knowledge about the objective world. Man acts as a *res cogitans* - a thinking substance able to discover the world.[22]

This epistemology entrenches the principal of subjectivity, which – in philosophical terms – refers to individual freedom. In its form of self-consciousness, subjectivity determines all aspects of modern culture, in particular, modern knowledge.[23]

Descartes' epistemology impacted profoundly upon the course of knowledge. As one scholar explains: "The Cartesian philosophy of the *cogito* proclaimed the private 'I think' as the only possible source for truth and explanation after the external phenomena of the world had all been 'doubted' away".[24] He further asserts that the 'I' philosophy tradition of Descartes, Kant and Husserl is the primary and self-sufficient base upon which knowledge is to be founded - primary and self-sufficient not in the way of objective things, but in the way of an undetermined creative source. As a result, all of these philosophers make a space for individual free will in their philosophies.[25] In this regard, Tibi is careful to point out that this is not an atheistic position. He argues that even Descartes acknowledges that God creates man but that man is able to create knowledge on his own, by his own means.[26]

Therefore modernity, as described by Tibi, results in what Parvez Manzoor has described as a 'de-divinised public order.' A natural consequence of this development is that ultimate values in such a social structure are political and existential as opposed to religious and trans-existential, which is the normative ideal in Muslim communities.[27] In epistemological terms

this represents a shift from metaphysics to positivism. Practically, this is manifested in replacing belief in the presence of absolute knowledge that resides beyond human capacity with the pursuit of partial knowledge that could be gathered and verified through scientific methods. Stated differently, this is a shift from belief in an absolute truth that controlled human life to belief in partial scientific truths that could be used by humans to control nature.[28]

As a result of this shift, an increasing number of social scientists consider metaphysics a fading religious pastime and hold that it should have been driven away from the human mental endeavour a long time ago. Tibi is no different and develops this orientation further, arguing that the only viable approach to Islam in the modern world is the sociological one.[29]

Considering Tibi's emphatic and wholehearted endorsement of modernity, it comes as no surprise that he considers resurgent voices of Islam as being fundamentalist - in the full pejorative sense. He as such asserts that contemporary Muslim fundamentalists contest the secular knowledge based on the cultural project of modernity, as well as the worldview related to it.[30] He bases this on his conception of modernity, which he regards as being composed of an institutional dimension (an idea he borrows from Anthony Giddens) as well as a cultural project (as held by Habermas). For Tibi these two concepts are inextricable. Any society wishing to make a successful transition to a modern social system needs both. The problem is that while the institutional dimension of modernity has been globalised, the cultural project has not, even though this possibility was not dismissed in the early post-colonial period. Later however, cultural reassertion advocated the rejection of alien knowledge, which meant banishing cultural modernity. Tibi finds it paradoxical that in the case of Islam the adoption of alien instruments, i.e. modern science and technology was

endorsed. He as such refers to this phenomenon as 'the Islamic dream of semi-modernity' which indicates "Muslim fundamentalist ambivalence vis-à-vis modernity and its tendency to split it into two components".[31]

For him the basic dilemma of contemporary Muslims with regards to their attitudes towards modern knowledge is that they simultaneously envisage adopting the instruments of modernity while rejecting its cultural underpinnings. In so doing, Tibi contends that they separate the achievements of modernity from the very knowledge that led to it and first made it possible.[32]

He argues that the essence of cultural modernity is the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* i.e. that knowledge of man stems from the doubt out of which certain human knowledge of the objective world grows. For him fundamentalism submits man to Allah's will whereas Cartesianism helps man to recognise himself as *res cogitans* - a thinking subject. In epistemological terms this translates as a shift from a religious worldview to a modern worldview. In rather prejudicial fashion Tibi thus concludes that any project - whether religious, postmodern or fundamentalist - that questions this worldview results in irrationalism.[33]

Tibi would thus have us believe that the root problem with any alternative worldview lies in its conception of knowledge. Only modern western knowledge is normative and the expression of any alternative that seeks to embark 'on the de-Westernisation of knowledge' is simply not epistemologically grounded.[34] This is also the major objection that Tibi raises against Islam.

Islam and all other de-Westernised sciences are not founded on the modernist principle of abstract subjectivity, which is the view that man is able to establish human knowledge of the objective world and to subject these discoveries to the pursuit of satisfying human needs. Tibi argues that Islamised sciences - though not traditional - are subordinated to religious traditions and as such do not permit the reflective posture of the Westernised sciences.[35] By his estimation these attitudes toward modern science and technology do not contribute to the accommodation of modern knowledge that Muslim people urgently need for the development of their societies. He further holds that such attitudes reflect the beginnings of a new counter-scientific trend in Arab culture. His biggest fear is that the politics of the Islamisation of knowledge could result in 'a new era of flat-earthism'.[36]

Tibi further contends that the twentieth century is the age of global confrontation between secular cultural modernity and religious culture.[37] He raises several questions that explicitly indicate his commitment to the secular vision of modernity. He asks why it is that Muslims are unable to share this view; why do they always use the fact of colonial rule to dismiss cultural modernity; and why do they involve the belief in Allah to disregard the ability of man. His explanation for all of this is that Muslim fundamentalist efforts to de-Westernise knowledge seeks to reverse the 'disenchantment of the world' and thus to subject man to supernatural powers.[38] Tibi's implication is glaringly obvious: any reassertion of Islam stands the risk of taking us back to the Dark Ages. What is most striking about his entire argument is its complete endorsement of classical modernity. He seems to see very distinct similarities between the European Enlightenment and the current need for Islam to modernise. Just as Europe had freed itself from the shackles of Christianity, so too must the Arab/Muslim world be emancipated from the stifling teachings of Islam. This obviously suggests that he sees it fit

to parallel the Christian paradigm of the Middle Ages with that of Islam. At the very least, such an extrapolation is glaringly naïve.

Critics have pointed out several other problems with Tibi's discourse. These will very briefly be considered before discussing the more general critiques of the modernist project he so passionately endorses. One critic points out that Tibi's work presents a rather severe case of dichotomic thinking which caricaturises both the West and Islam. He argues that Tibi equates the West with modernity, which in turn is neatly lined up with Cartesianism. In a similar way Islam is homogenised under the heading of 'Islamic fundamentalism'.[39] A more fiery response criticises Tibi for exhausting all his energies only to produce a one-sided indictment of 'Muslim fundamentalism' and offering an ill-conceived and ineptly executed apology of modernity. This critic goes even further, arguing that Tibi's vision of modernism is intellectually dated, philosophically shallow and ideologically docile.[40] Even though this last criticism seems fully justified, it does not spare the task of responding to the claims that Tibi makes. The fact that Tibi chooses to subject Islam to a modernist critique justifies an exploration of the critiques of modernity. It is thus necessary to consider both the philosophical and ideological critiques raised in response to modernity.

3. Criticisms of Modernity

By now it should be clear that modernity has been defined in terms of beliefs and values identified with Enlightenment thought, relentless pursuit of progress, and control of nature for the wellbeing of humanity.[41] These beliefs and values have been conceptualised by way of promises and ideals held to be lofty and true, in the most absolute sense. As such, the failure of these promises and the discontent of these ideals would naturally lead to crisis. The aspirations of the modernist vision of society have been expressed by many contemporary

scholars, of which Tibi is just one example. In what follows some of the shortcomings of this vision will be explored. This should lead back to the philosophical underpinnings of modernity, which will then be critiqued. The counter-wave against modernity gave rise to postmodernity, which will be considered hereafter.

3.1 Moral and socio-political trappings of the Modernist vision

A contemporary scholar of note eloquently pronounces that "the world at the dawn of the twenty-first century challenges the 'wisdom' and expectations of the prophets of modernity".[42] Current scepticism towards modernisation and development theory challenges the longstanding claim that the development of modern states and societies requires Westernisation and secularisation.[43] Although Westernisation has indeed developed and advanced the bureaucratic mechanisms of modern society, it has not been nearly as successful at eradicating the predicaments of humanity. In this regard another critic contends that the expression 'crisis of modernity' needs to be understood in terms of modernity's inability to redeem its promise of delivering a model of perfect historical order. Explaining further, he emphasises that modern societies are not helpless at facing the inner challenges of governance and economy, which are primary determinants of the human condition in terms of the modernist vision, nor are modern polities vulnerable to any threats by external enemies. Rather, upholders of the modernist vision are perplexed by the realisation that their global city is not a city of humanity.[44]

A Turkish Islamist scholar lends his support to this criticism by focusing on the plight of the environment as well as the individual. He exclaims that although modernism had promised paradise on earth, it has instead turned the entire planet into a living hell. He goes further, adding that along with pollution of the environment modernism has also succeeded in

polluting the soul.[45] While many have equated the western discourse of modernity with secularism, not much attention has been focused on the above description of modernity as a dual-pollutant which encompasses more than just a philosophy that advocates the separation of church and state. Abdelwahab Elmessiri is one of the few scholars to have elaborated on this in some detail in his writings.

In spite of the realisation by many that modernity and secularism are synonymous, only a special few have pondered over the nature of the secular worldview and how it relates to modernity. Elmessiri contends that the identity of western modernity is more in keeping with what he refers to as comprehensive secularism. The separation of church and state is a worldview that cannot claim any comprehensiveness and he thus refers to it as partial secularism. He argues that such a worldview confines itself to the realm of politics and perhaps economics, but maintains complete silence on absolute or permanent values, be they moral, religious or otherwise. It also does not address itself to ultimate things like the origin of humanity, human destiny, the purpose of life and other matters.

By contrast, he points out that comprehensive secularism is a completely different outlook that does not merely aim at the separation of church and state and some aspects of public life; it aims at the separation of all values - religious, moral, or human - not only from the state but also from public and private life and from the world at large.[46] Therefore, it is in this comprehensive regard that Western modernity and secularism are almost synonymous. In referring to one the other is also tacitly implied. As such, Elmessiri defines Western modernity as the adoption of value-free science as the basis of humanity's world outlook and as a source of values and norms. This outlook reorients the individual to follow value-free laws instead of modifying the world to fit human needs and aspirations.[47] History itself stands

witness and testifies against the disastrous consequences of this worldview. However, in order to manifest this more clearly there has to be a move towards a more holistic reading of history, more specifically, a more holistic reading of the history of secularism itself.

Elmessiri argues that in the Western world the paradigmatic sequence of immanentisation (i.e. the shift from a transcendental worldview to a material one), and therefore secularisation, modernisation and naturalisation, began sometime in the Middle Ages. This occurred when some economic enclaves 'freed' themselves from Christian values or concepts such as 'fair price'. He goes on to explain that only strictly economic criteria now applied to economic activity and success and failure was stripped of any moral or human considerations. He thus asserts that the economic sphere was immanantised, becoming value-free, referring only to itself, its criteria and standards being immanent in it. This development established a pattern that repeated itself in all other spheres of human activity.[48]

Another significant example of this pattern alluded to by Elmessiri is that of the political sphere. He draws our attention to the birth of the theory of the modern state during the Renaissance. The state, in this instance, became value-free, justifying itself by the *raison de' etat* rather than seeking legitimacy on a religious or moral basis. As a result the realm of politics freed itself from any values external to it, and was judged by criteria immanent to it. In similar vein, all spheres of human life, including science, were freed from religious and moral values and considerations, becoming self-sufficient, self-regulating, self-transforming, and self-explanatory.[49]

Elmessiri bemoans the fact that this emergent secular worldview was never clearly articulated because the history of secularism was monitored by the Western social sciences in a

piecemeal and diachronic fashion. This history was fragmented into various bits, first humanism and/or the Reformation, the Enlightenment, rationalism, and utilitarianism; then the counter-Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Darwinism; then positivism, existentialism, phenomenology; and finally the end of history and postmodernism.[50] This piecemeal approach concealed many of the more appalling aspects of the Western modernist worldview. Elmessiri argues that this resulted in some of the most shameful ideologies of the recent past like Racism, Imperialism and Nazism being seen as mere aberrations, having a history of their own, distinct from the history of secularism and modernity. When the Western modernist worldview is approached holistically it becomes apparent that these so-called aberrations are in fact part and parcel of the Western civilisational model.

His central contention is that by grasping this overall unity and articulating it into a comprehensive paradigm - thereby developing a uniform and complex paradigm of secularism - we are able to unmask the relationship between the Enlightenment and Deconstruction; between modernisation, modernism and postmodernism; between Nietzcheanism and Hitler, pragmatism and Eichmann; between rationalism, imperialism, and the Holocaust.[51] From the vantage point of this novel paradigm it becomes much easier to expose the moral and socio-political trappings of the modernist vision.

Elmessiri points out that in light of the above it is not plausible to regard oppressive ideologies of the past and the present - like Nazism and Zionism - as exceptional cases because modernist discourse reflects a general pattern of extermination that began in the West from the time of the Renaissance in countries like North America, right up to the present in countries like Vietnam, Chechnya and Bosnia[52]

He supports the contention that there is a direct link between Western civilisation and genocide on several grounds.[53] Firstly, he points out that Western civilisation is a technological civilisation that elevates progress at any price, even to the detriment of humanity. The resultant hardship and suffering, both physically and spiritually, are not of much significance in a culture that supports the principle of the survival of the fittest and ignores traditional values like being charitable to the weak and lending assistance to those in need. By this logic the Nazis were able to legitimate the extermination of the Jews because they were viewed as non-productive or useless. This was admittedly an extreme solution but Elmessiri argues that other Western countries like America and Poland bear a certain degree of culpability because they refused to give asylum to this "useless" ethnic grouping.

A second trend that justifies drawing parallels between genocide and Western culture is that the "solution" to the Jewish problem adopted by the Nazis shares many similarities with solutions adopted by other Western Imperialist countries. The genocide of the Red Indians of America is an appropriate example. Elmessiri points out that Nazism and Imperialism share the common belief of the superiority of the Arian race.

Finally, he points out that a central trait of Western civilisation - and a phenomenon common to both Zionism and Nazism - is the rationality of its procedures and methods and the irrationality of its objectives and goals. He notes that this is a characteristic of Western civilisation that has also been discussed in the writings of Max Weber, the famous sociologist. Perhaps the best examples of this antinomy between objective and method are the Nazi death camps and the systematic expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland. In both these cases horrendous atrocities are afflicted upon a target population with the utmost precision and planning.

Charles Taylor, the distinguished Canadian philosopher, tacitly endorses most of the contentions made thus far. He identifies three malaises of modernity that challenge blissful human existence. These are individualism, the primacy of instrumental reason, and the loss of freedom resulting from the preceding two. In his words: "The first fear is about what we might call a loss of meaning, the fading of moral horizons. The second concerns the eclipse of ends, in face of rampant instrumental reason. And the third is about a loss of freedom".[54]

Taylor equates individualism with a loss of purpose. Its darker side involves a centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives making them poorer in meaning and less concerned with others or society. These results are manifested in expressions such as "permissive society", "me generation", or the prevalence of narcissism.[55]

He explains the second malaise of Modernity -instrumental reason – as a kind of rationality that we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. In this scheme of things maximum efficiency and the best cost-output ratio is the measure of success.[56]

Bringing the two together, he argues that on the political level individualism and instrumental reason have frightening consequences. He points out that giving weight to instrumental reason, in serious moral deliberation, may be highly destructive.[57] Elmessiri has aptly demonstrated this earlier. Taylor thus concludes that any society structured around instrumental reason imposes a great loss of freedom on both individuals and the group because it is not only our social decisions that are shaped by these forces. He rightfully contends that an individual lifestyle is hard to sustain against the grain.[58] In other words,

yielding to the pressure of conformity is no less a loss of freedom then submitting to the dictates of instrumental reason.

Although the Modernist vision was inspired by the potential of the individual at its inception, history has clearly shown that this has not always been to the advantage of either the individual or society. As has been argued above, humanity - as a collective - has had to suffer the consequences of what has only recently been recognised as a warped vision. Modernity, as a philosophy, did indeed aspire towards moral and socio-political upliftment and therefore its failure can only be attributed to an inherent weakness in its vision. It is thus necessary to analyse the philosophical underpinnings of Modernity in order to understand the considerable trauma it has exacted upon the social unit as well as the individual.

3.2 Critique of the philosophical underpinnings of Modernity

Parvez Manzoor, a trenchant critic of Modernity, provides an apt and concise summary of the main contentions raised against it. It is worth quoting him at length as he provides us with a firm basis for proceeding on to a deeper critique of the philosophical underpinnings of Modernity. In his unique style, Parvez Manzoor points out:

- that the truth claims of Enlightenment reason are based on circular logic;
- that the notion of a sovereign, transcendent and ahistorical, subject whose reason is the touchstone of all knowledge is extremely 'problematic';
- that the doctrine of progress is 'paradoxical';
- that the cult of freedom which renders all 'taboos' illegitimate and unnecessary is inimical to the preservation of any kind of moral, and by extension, social and political, order;
- that the charter of the modern political community, nay any political community, is always parochial and exclusive;

- that the universality of justice and rights is a metaphysical claim that cannot be redeemed within a socio-political context;
- indeed, that the jurisdiction of both reason and meaning extends far beyond the cosmopolis of modernity.[59]

Hindsight sometimes casts harsh glances upon the past and it therefore has to be remembered that time alone can tell whether visions of the future are to meet with success or not. Bearing this in mind, Parvez Manzoor indicates that the delegitimation of modernity is important because it not only opens up a new intellectual space, but it also creates a different agenda for a dialogue between modernists and others.[60] In order to pursue this dialogue to its fullest we must go back to the beginning and examine the philosophical roots of modernity with a critical eye.

As has been argued earlier, the Enlightenment marked a decisive epistemological shift that ushered in the age of modernity. The majority of the philosophers of the Enlightenment embraced the shift from a God-centred worldview to one that centred on the individual. However, only an elite few can be regarded as the 'Mapmakers'. These were the individuals that broke new ground, charting a course in whose path others were to follow. The most important of them are Roger Bacon, Rene' Descartes and Auguste Comte.[61] Although Parvez Manzoor raises many criticisms against modernity it is important to briefly examine the contributions and criticisms of these three individuals because of their centrality to the modernist worldview.

Bacon is regarded as the father of the experimental method in the West. Although this major breakthrough revolutionised the experimental sciences, it had the adverse effect of separating them from morality and faith. Along with Descartes, Bacon ushered in a mindset that was

more concerned with *how* to achieve a set goal rather than *why* to pursue it in the first place. This has prompted a scholar of more recent times to suggest that ever since then the West has stopped asking *why* questions. The focus has shifted to *how* to make an atom bomb and no one asks *why* we should have one in the first place.[62] This emergence of value-free science compliments and corresponds to the trend pointed out by Elmessiri in his discussion on value-free economics and politics. Bacon's scientific method spawned a philosophy of non-accountability that became pivotal in entrenching the instrumental reason censured by Charles Taylor above. Despite the profound impact of Bacon's thought in modern times, his contribution to the corpus of human knowledge carried within it a virulent and destructive strand. Notwithstanding, his thought was by no means as influential or as dangerous as that of Descartes'.

Rene' Descartes is without a doubt the most important of the three philosophers mentioned. Whereas Bacon is credited with revolutionising the experimental sciences, Descartes was responsible for revolutionising no less than the human mind. It was his philosophy that ushered in the epistemological age. Ever since Descartes most philosophers – even those critical of him – have been defining their ontology, their view of what is, on the basis of a prior doctrine of what we can know.[63] In the words of Charles Taylor: "they are all practising the structural idealism of the epistemological age."

As Taylor explains, central to the philosophy articulated by Descartes is the view that we can somehow come to grips with the problem of knowledge and as such legitimate our opinions on various things like God, the world, or human life.[64] Descartes felt that he had solved the problem of knowledge by calling into question everything that could be doubted until he reached the indubitable proposition: "I think, therefore, I exist".[65] This pithy saying had

enormous consequences. Using it as a foundation, one is able to deduce the existence of all real things – including God – by arguing from the reality of thought to a presumed reality of being.[66] By following this approach, the modern West inherited a twofold legacy from Descartes:

> (1) a *foundationalism* that equates knowledge with secure foundations and clear and distinct ideas, and (2) an emphasis on subjectivity that anchors the knowledge of God but leaves the world of nature "godless."

> This decisive shift in the understanding of subjectivity's importance is connected with other cultural developments. As the Newtonian and mechanical worldview was increasingly established as the only legitimate scientific position, a move from theism to deism took place. The terms "deism" and "theism" were originally synonymous, but "deism" came to refer to the view that the divine lacks an immediate ongoing personal relation to the world [...]. David Hume's (1711-76) critique of the metaphysical view of causality and his demolition of the argument from miracles advanced a naturalistic view of the world; and in the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution further undercut natural theologies, with evolution providing an alternative explanation to divine theology. These developments in the natural sciences eliminated God entirely from the order and design of the material world.[67]

Not only did Descartes' *cogito* result in the loss of transcendence – thereby rendering revelation and its whole claim to faith futile and useless – it also established the individual awareness of one's own limited self as the criterion of existence.[68] This rejection of both transcendence and community at once, turned human society into an arena of confrontation between individuals and groups driven by their will to growth and their will to power.[69] The implications of this mindset carry the gravest of consequences. Humankind had effectively taken the subjective self as the locus for all values thereby leaving society to the mercy of the will of its most powerful, not necessarily its most humane and compassionate.

Moving firmly along this trajectory, Western thought then encountered the positivism of Auguste Comte. Positivism is best explained as the denial of reality to anything not perceived through the senses, or not measurable by mathematics; this became the tacit postulate of all that goes under the name of "modern science" or "Western science", pervading the humanities and social sciences since Comte as well. All of these disciplines rest on the premise that man is merely another object of nature, similar to the objects studied in physics, chemistry and biology.[70]

Comtean philosophy adopts an inimical posture to religious or metaphysical beliefs, dismissing them as mere fictions and superstition, which will ultimately be overrun by positive or scientific developments in which explanation takes the form of showing correlations between observed phenomena.[71] Critics of Comte – on this account – dismiss his theory in light of the resurgence of religion in the current era and as such accuse him of reifying bourgeois-scientific standards of knowledge as well as displaying Eurocentric arrogance.[72]

Further, critics of the absolute faith placed in science by Comtean Philosophy point out that science itself has disproved the objectivity and decisiveness of its outcomes:

> The concept of relativity and the new horizons in macrocosmos and microcosmos showed that each scientific innovation complicates the problems because of creating more unknown variables than before, rather than reaching to a decisive truth.[73]

Bacon, Descartes and Comte were all bound by a singular faith, that is, a faith in the subjective self. They brought to the experimental sciences, philosophy and the social sciences the belief that humankind had all the answers. In this way they and all those that followed in

their stead tried to establish a fixed centre that served as the source and foundation of all that could be known. This in essence was the promise that was made by modernity. By shifting from the transcendent (that which was beyond) to the immanent (that which was within), humankind would progress and know only prosperity. However, after a few centuries in which there had indeed been remarkable progress humanity once again found itself at an impasse due to the discontents of modernity. As pointed out earlier by Parvez Manzoor, most scholars now reject the claims made by modernity as rather tenuous. This marked the shift, once again, from one paradigm of thought to another. Loss of faith in the project of modernity was accompanied by the onset of postmodernity.

4. From the Discontents of Modernity to Postmodernity

A prominent contemporary scholar remarks that until Descartes the various levels of reality that determined human existence were understood in relation to God. Then, with the onset of Cartesian rationalism, individual human existence became the criterion of reality and truth. In the mainstream of Western thought, ontology gave way to epistemology, epistemology to logic, and finally logic was confronted by the antirational 'philosophies' so prevalent today.[74]

Abdelwahab Elmessiri is once again helpful in charting out the course that saw the shift from modernity and its discontents to postmodernity.[75] As mentioned earlier, he argues that modernity – and therefore comprehensive secularism – is a form of immanence, implying that rising levels of secularisation meant rising levels of immanentisation. This naturally leads to the virtual disappearance of God as the transcendental organising power in the universe:

> We can view the whole process of immanentization / modernization / secularization in terms of the death of God discourse. God first became incarnate not in man but in humanity as a whole, and not temporarily but permanently. This led to the rise of humanism and the solipsistic subject.

> This humanism became racism when God is incarnate in one people; it becomes fascism when God is incarnate in the leader. But the incarnation is not confined to the human sphere, for God becomes incarnate in nature. This gives rise to the sharp dualism [of humanity versus nature and of subject versus object] and the frantic attempt of German *idealistic* philosophy to assert the parallelism of humanity and nature, subject and object. Then God became incarnate in nature-matter only [...] with nature-matter at the center. Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel all operated in terms of this stage of immanence, which, despite all its fluctuations and divisions, is logocentric. This gave rise to Enlightenment, Western rationalism, and what I term *heroic materialism*.
>
> But the process went on inexorably, and immanentization (secularization / modernization) went deeper. The center kept on shifting and the incarnations became too many, until we were faced with multiple centers. Nature itself was fragmented and atomized. Losing its stability, coherence, and self-referentiality, it could no longer serve as a stable centre.[76]

We now have to turn our attention to postmodernism in order to make sense of the shift from a fixed centre – as in the case of modernity – to the rise of multiple centres, multiple alternatives, and a multiplicity of truths.

5. The Postmodern Worldview

The majority of scholars express the view that postmodernity is no more than a continuation or a further unfolding of modernity.[77] Elmessiri describes postmodernity as a move from "the solid logocentric stage of modernity to its liquid stage, the stage of materialist irrationalism and antiheroism and a centerless world".[78] Whereas modernity had renounced the authority of religion – displacing metaphysics in favour of reason – postmodernity no longer asserts anything positive or substantive. Postmodern theory renounces even reason as a foundational theory of norms:

> Modernist consciousness, which progressively shifted its gaze from 'reason' to 'nature' to 'history', now proclaims that there exists no Archemedian point, no foundational text, that may guide our humanity towards any desirable or conceivable goal. Rather, the admission is that reason is unable to overcome the antinomy of norm and history, that the 'is' of world-history does not lead to any 'ought' of the human existence.[79]

So, while postmodernity does indeed proceed on the same continuum as modernity, it can be more accurately described as "the rejection of modernist ideology in a modern world".[80] Modernist ideology had previously dictated that reason alone can prevail and that only through reason can human beings conquer and control nature. At the very least, modernist ideology sought to cast a firm and absolute foundation that served as the basis of reality. Postmodernity, by contrast, argues that there are multiple realities that are not necessarily related.[81] The postmodern condition is one that transcends the arguments and battles of which view of reality was true to the position that none are true.[82] This sceptical posture is a true reflection of the fundamental axiomatic principal of postmodernist thought: suspicion and rejection of all 'grand narratives'.

Postmodernists refer to any legitimating discourse as a 'grand narrative' or a 'metanarrative'. Metanarratives or grand narratives are referred to as such because they claim to be able to account for, explain, and subordinate all lesser narratives.[83] Religious ideologies like Islam and Christianity and political ideologies like Marxism are also examples of grand narratives in that they provide the ethos or worldview according to which the individual – and ultimately society – fashions his/her very existence.

Reason – as a concept that informs truth and acts as the criterion for determining what constitutes knowledge – is another paradigm example of a grand narrative. It gained

ascendancy in the 18th century when it was applied to every area of life like religion, morality, politics, and social life. Reason served as the foundational norm that was used to justify everything, just as religion before it.

> [Postmodernism] rejects the pursuit of "grand narratives" and denies the possibility of acquiring comprehensive knowledge through "scientific" methods. For postmodernism, *reason* cannot be a reliable source of knowledge because reason itself is a hegemonic project. Ultimate truth is impossible to attain because everyone has his/her own truth.[84]

It should now be manifestly clear that the postmodern response to the crisis of modernity – the failure of its grand narratives – has been to relativise all truth claims. Whereas modernists sought to find meaning in totality, later scholars pointed out that the only secure thing about modernity is its insecurity; it is in a perpetual state of flux and it is this flux that defines the main nature of postmodernity.[85] Whereas progress had been the distinguishing feature of modernity, nihilism or the loss of any spiritual centre is what distinguishes postmodernity.[86] While modernity sought to establish a foundational text – a foundational norm or grand narrative – that legitimated and explained its project, postmodernity vociferously rejected any kind of foundational text. In spite of this rejection, critics have argued that postmodern discourse is in itself nothing more then another grand narrative. It is as such imperative to consider this, as well as other criticisms of postmodernism.

Critics have argued that the notion that people have stopped believing in grand narratives because such narratives marginalise minorities inadvertently make the assumption that all people universally believe in justice, which is in itself another grand narrative.[87] Therefore, postmodernism is as guilty as modernism for perpetuating grand narratives. In denying any fixed or stable centre, postmodernism entrenches a centre-less world in a constant state of

flux as the norm or only reality. Such relativism is not arbitrary and in fact engenders a unique philosophy of its own. For example, critics point out that postmodernism even has its own metaphysics despite its frantic attempt to deny any metaphysical stance.[88] Elmessiri is of the view that while postmodernism denies transcendence, totality, permanence, and duality, its very denial has shown its true philosophical identity as an expression of the metaphysics of immanence.[89] This is a point that has been alluded to earlier.

While most critics concede that postmodernism has indeed proven to be effective as a critique of modernity, they also point out that it does not constitute an alternative social and political project due to its inherent cynicism and nihilism.[90] However, postmodernist discourse has won favour with almost every marginalised ideology because of its inherent pluralistic nature. While it is not emphatic in endorsing any given position, it is by no means categorical in dismissing any given view either. This has created plenty of space for groups previously rejected by mainstream, hegemonic ideologies like modernity. A pertinent example is the re-emergence of religion and spirituality. The case of Islam will now be stressed to emphasise and explore this rebirth.

6. From Postmodernism to Islamism

The resurgence of religion in both industrial and peasant societies is one of the most significant features of transcending postmodernism.[91] One may even argue that it is a resurgence borne out of the exasperation of treading on shaky ground. While postmodernism is to be fully acknowledged for creating the space that made such a resurgence possible, it has failed dismally – as a philosophy – to provide a firm foundation for an alternative world view. As a result, people have increasingly begun turning back to religion.

Islamism, or the influence of an Islamic worldview in the socio-political sphere, is a specific example of this resurgence. Islamism is viewed as a product of the frustration of the promises of Western modernisation and, more specifically, represents a critique of modernism that displays remarkable similarities with postmodernism.[92] These similarities include a rejection of the determinism, rationalism, and positivism of the modernist paradigm.[93] However, there are fundamental differences between Islamism and postmodernism that ultimately make them incompatible. Ali Bulac, an Islamist scholar, explains that Islam is ultimately a 'total doctrine' that rejects the universalism and relativism of postmodernism.[94]

In spite of the fundamental differences, it is quite enlightening to explore the fascination that postmodernism holds for Islamists. Mustafa Armagan, another Islamist thinker, is helpful in this regard. He explains that:

> [...] postmodernism is attractive to Islamists because: (1) it shows the failures and limitations of modernism; (2) given the exhaustion of modernism, the postmodernist search for alternatives opens up an opportunity for Islam; (3) in their rejection of the secular uniformity of modernism, postmodernists freely borrow from tradition and religion which Islamists advocate; (4) the postmodernist emphasis on diversity and (5) the announcement of the death of 'meta-narratives' strengthens the hand of Islam in its struggle against modern 'isms' such as socialism, positivism or Darwinism.[95]

Returning to the critique of postmodernism, Armagan argues that postmodernist 'playfulness' results in the rejection of a unitary point of reference for truth and thereby endorses the acceptance of multiple perspectives as equally valid. He therefore holds that this constitutes a second wave of secularisation. Explaining further, he argues that in the first phase of

secularisation, undertaken by modernism, the self recreated the outside world (society, state, nature, art, religion, etc) by using reason.

> In the current phase of secularization, the self has begun to reflect on the outside world which the self created through reflection in the first place. Modernists, although secularized, still retained the traditional notion of a distinction between form and essence. For the postmodernists, however, form is everything – style constitutes content and rhetoric makes up reality.[96]

Because of this, he regards postmodernism as a commercial paganism that turns religions into playthings and cannot as such be an ally to Islam. The stage is therefore now set for deep and critical introspection that should produce compelling solutions to the exigencies of everyday life. Such solutions should be brought forth from Islam's very own unique tradition.

7. Conclusion

This chapter began with three epigraphs that represented the intellectual trends of modernity, postmodernity and the resurgent voice of authentic Islam. In what followed, an attempt was made to chart the course of Islamic thought concentrating specifically on its junctures with modernity and postmodernity. By now it should be quite apparent that Islamic thought did not readily succumb to the charms of the dominant discourses with which it interacted. There is no denying that certain scholars made strong cases in favour of modernist or postmodernist orientations, but these attempts were not able to silence the dissent of those who chose to speak in favour of an authentic Islamic alternative.

What these unfolding developments clearly stress is that the discourses of modernity and postmodernity were by no means compelling enough to prompt a wholesale abandonment of the intellectual project of Islam. It is in this light that we need to appreciate the re-emergence

of an Islamic alternative or foundational text. Attention will now be turned towards examining what the basis of this claim exactly entails and whether it is truly justifiable.

Condemnation of modernity's proffered solutions reaches near climax so it seems odd that Muslims should be arguing for the re-establishment of the foundational text – albeit on their own terms. Added to this is the sceptical voice of postmodernism still cautioning against the adoption of grand narratives. It must now be established whether the Qurʾān is indeed able to vindicate the claims of Islamic authenticity, or whether modernist and postmodernist rhetoric is able to refute the validity of the Qurʾān as foundational text. Chapter two will examine the validity of Islam's claim to authenticity, while chapter three aims to finally address the status and reception of the Qurʾān as foundational text.

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CHAPTER TWO

> Continuing in the old ways does not necessarily mean preserving our heritage or holding on to our authenticity. Authenticity is not a fixed point in the past to which we must return in order to establish our identity. It is rather a constant capacity for movement and for going beyond existing limits towards a world which, while assimilating the past and its knowledge, looks ahead to a better future. – **Adonis** [1]

> Today, man's fundamental problem is self-assertion rather than simple self-preservation. The question of self-assertion necessarily leads to the question of self-perception. – **Ahmet Davutoglu** [2]

> For I am woman (or man) by accident but Muslim by choice ... – **Maysam al-Fārūqī**[3]

1. Introduction

The most important factor enabling Islamic thought to maintain relevance in light of the challenges of modernity and postmodernity has been its persistent claims to authenticity. Many Muslim scholars argue that Islam is different from other worldviews or ideologies and not only special or privileged for adherents to the faith; Islam is somehow intrinsically unique.

The opening epigraphs once again serve as a broad framework for this chapter. Adonis (ʿAli Ahmed Said), a Syrian essayist and poet of great depth and substance poignantly captures what authenticity *is not*. Authenticity is not simply a brief historical moment

immortalised in the heritage or tradition of any given social collective, but much more. We cannot reclaim who we are by returning to a fixed point to re-enact the past because identity is far more firmly embedded. We need to dig deeper *in order to establish* who we indeed are. Authenticity is therefore not about tradition as much as it is about the essence of being. Ahmet Davutoglu, the Turkish philosopher whose insightful epitaph makes the important link between identity and authenticity, aptly captures this. He emphasises that one has to possess the necessary self-awareness before being able to make any assertions of uniqueness or authenticity. Finally, Maysam al-Fārūqi reminds us that we all choose who we essentially are and consequently none can truly be Muslim except by choice. However, identity is by no means uni-dimensional and there are many components that contribute to the individual makeup of any person. In this complex hierarchy of the self there is always one component that is granted primary importance and by which a person chooses to be identified. For the committed Muslim primacy is given to Islam.

A fundamental trait of Islam is that it is logocentric; it is a faith wherein the Qur'ān is privileged as the wellspring of all guidance and values. The preceding chapter has shown that the intellectual discourses of modernity and postmodernity had sought to challenge this privileged position. Modernity offered reason as an alternative and Postmodernity happily played the role of sceptic and all-round critic. While the Qur'ān may not have been completely subverted in the face of this onslaught, none would deny that Islamic thought was effectively shoved into hibernation by the sheer appeal of modernist discourse. It is only with the failure of modernity and the onset of postmodernity that we see Islamic thought once again rising from its slumber.

The main task of this chapter, therefore, is to attempt to vindicate Islam's claims of authenticity. In order to do so effectively, I will construct a philosophical backbone sturdy enough to support and uphold these assertions. I will move on to a detailed exposition of where the Qur'ān fits into the scheme of things in the next chapter.

In this chapter I will argue that Islamic authenticity has to be understood in terms of ontological self-perception. The re-emergence of the Qur'ān as foundational text must therefore be viewed as a re-assertion of this ontological self-perception. This is an absolute prerequisite to understanding the position of the Qur'ān in the Islamic epistemological hierarchy. Classical Muslim scholarship understood the importance of ontology and regarded it as the basis for any given epistemology. However, as Charles Taylor has pointed out, modern philosophy (since Descartes) has granted pride of place to epistemology so that ontology has ever since been defined on the basis of prior doctrines of what we can know, i.e. epistemology has since dictated what constitutes ontology.[4]

This is a problem that will be grappled with in some detail here. I will argue that every epistemology is an articulation of ontology, even if this very important insight is unacknowledged or remains unrecognised. This clearly suggests that ontology has to be given primacy over epistemology in order to truly understand the foundations of any given intellectual discourse.

Of even greater importance is the role of ontology in human agency. In this regard I will argue that there is a direct relationship between conceptions of the self and moral action. Similar to the case of epistemology, all moral actions also re-affirm a given ontology.

Since Islamic thought is the framework within which this study is located, I will demonstrate the relevance of these assertions by comparing and contrasting it with the alternative paradigm of secularism. I will explore the ontological underpinnings of both paradigms thereby demonstrating that Islamic thought and secular thought spawn very different worldviews. This should go a long way to explaining the acute cultural and ideological dilemmas that inevitably arise at the juncture of these essentially distinct philosophies.

Finally, I will revisit the question of authenticity in order to explain what it *is*, which requires explaining what understanding Islamic authenticity in terms of ontological self-perception entails.

2. *Ontological Self-Perception*

Shifts in philosophical method and outlook are in recent times popularly being referred to as "turns".[5] It should by now be quite apparent that I have been paying particular attention to two very important developments, respectively referred to as the "epistemological turn" and the "ontological turn." Philosophy in the modern period is characterised by a shift from its previous preoccupation with metaphysical issues to an overwhelming interest in the possibility and nature of knowledge. This "epistemological

turn" dominated philosophy for at least two centuries, only being brought under critical scrutiny in the early part of the last century.[6] Such critical examination resulted in a search for new alternatives and different approaches. Anglo-American philosophy, for example, took a "linguistic turn" in the early part of the last century, analyzing language, and thereby seeking to achieve many of the same goals sought by epistemology in its analysis of the mind.[7] In similar vein, I will be arguing the case in favour of an "ontological turn."

2.1 From the epistemological turn to the ontological turn

Charles Taylor argues that the main reason for the dominance of the epistemological model lies in the supposed unintelligibility of a rival account.[8] The model had gained such popularity that it became "too obvious for words." Stated differently, the epistemological model became "the organizing principle for a wide range of the practices in which we think and act and deal with the world." The influence of this model has been virtually all-pervasive, embedded in our interaction with the natural sciences, technology, our construal of political life, in our methods of healing, regimenting, organising people in society and numerous other spheres.[9] Taylor advises that freeing oneself from this model cannot be done by just showing an alternative.

> What we need to do is get over the presumption of the unique conceivability of the embedded picture. But to do this, we have to take a new stance towards our practices. Instead of just living in them and taking their implicit construal of things as the way things are, we have to understand how they have come to be, how they came to embed a certain view of things.[10]

This in brief is what taking the ontological turn entails. In order to free the epistemologist from the imprisonment of his own model we need to be able to understand how this worldview came into being and then show what an alternative would look like. A considerable part of the first chapter dealt with this worldview and its intimate link with the discourse of modernity. I will now devote attention to showing what the chosen alternative, namely the ontological turn, entails. However, a few brief comments on the epistemological turn are necessary beforehand.

Philosophy in the modern period has drawn its authority from epistemology, more specifically, from its claim to provide the foundations for the rest of inquiry. "Epistemology reigned as "the tribunal of pure reason," the high priest of culture that could authorise some intellectual endeavors and condemn others".[11] In brief, the basis of the epistemological turn was its position on the foundations of knowledge and the knowing subject.[12] Theories of knowledge served as the foundation of truth and falsehood and were products of human reason, residing within the individual self. Reason as such determined what we could know and this in effect affirmed what existed. This is obviously a simple reduction of thought processes that took centuries to unfold but it aptly captures the essence of the epistemological paradigm in its most extreme form.

Ancient Philosophy directed the idea of existence to the physical world, in which matter was regarded as an eternal substance.[13] Modern philosophy, initiated by Descartes, began to doubt the existence of the physical world by the realisation that reality cannot be known directly and that our senses are but mental portrayals of what we perceive to exist.

This marked a new phase in metaphysical thought, and primacy now shifted from ontology (the study of what exists) to epistemology (the study of what we can know).[14] While the epistemological turn leaves behind a tremendous legacy, it is still worthwhile asking whether ignoring ontology was really justifiable. In order to establish this, the issue must be examined at the level of metaphysics.

The subject matter of classical metaphysics was "the study of that which exists through that which exists".[15] In its original meaning, metaphysics was not some fantastic attempt to establish a world behind the world but rather an analysis of those structures of being that we encounter in every meeting with reality.[16] Therefore, according to this definition ontology and metaphysics are synonymous; but "the preposition *meta* now has the irremediable connotation of pointing to a duplication of this world by a transcendent realm of beings. Therefore, it is perhaps less misleading to speak of ontology instead of metaphysics".[17]

In the modern period we find that the subject matter of metaphysics is no longer that which exists but rather thought itself. This is because "when humankind began to question that which they knew, becoming aware of the instruments of this knowledge, thought itself became the subject of thought".[18] This pithy comment very accurately describes the epistemological turn. Even though the classical and contemporary subject-matter of metaphysics seem to be at variance – the first being concerned with human existence and the latter with human thought – both are reducible to the central issue of existence. Ultimately, inquiry into human thought is also about existence or being. In

other words, even though philosophy has largely ignored ontology by focusing on epistemology, questions of being are ultimately unavoidable. This realisation has not come easily and is still lost to many. No matter what "shifts" or "turns" occur in philosophy, at a metaphysical level, ontological primacy is unavoidable:

> The function of metaphysics has become to inquire into the essential structure of our thought, while still preserving its primary function; and indeed its new function [inquiring into the structure of our thought] does not conflict with its primary function [inquiring into being or existence]. That is because if we inquire into the essential categories of human thought and the existing relationships between the two, and the reliance of the one on the other, then we would be compelled to inquire into the existing relationships between the various forms of existence that we accept in our body of rational concepts. In this case *ontological primacy* will never be given up but will simply be given a clearer meaning. What is given up is the idea of the separate reality as a possible field of inquiry.[19]

This insight is of tremendous importance because it makes absolutely clear that epistemological paradigms are no more than manufactured products shaped by ontological concerns. Epistemically speaking, thought paradigms could be described as predicates of judgement, but ontologically, they ascribe modes of existence.[20] Attention will now be devoted to explaining this in some detail.

2.2. The primacy of ontology

Our inquiry thus far has been implicitly oscillating between the disciplines of philosophy and theology, suggesting a strong link between the two. However, this inter-disciplinary movement by no means suggests that Islamic thought is to be characterised by one or the

other discipline. Islamic thought is a compound construct with many facets, including the philosophical and the theological. The inference being suggested is that what ultimately resides at the core of any thought paradigm is the question of being. Islamic thought is in this regard no different. Therefore, the link that binds philosophy and theology is necessarily ontological. This assertion warrants further explanation.

Whereas theology can be described as constituting a special realm of knowledge that deals with a special object and employs a special method, there is no generally accepted definition of philosophy in this regard.[21] Detailing the nature and concern of theology is necessary before exploring any definition of philosophy and its relationship to theology.

Paul Tillich insightfully points out that theology moves back and forth between two poles, "the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received".[22] While his elaboration goes on to address the issue specifically within the Christian tradition, the scope of his insight is much broader. By stressing the continuity between the eternal and the temporal, or what can be equally described as the relationship between the transcendent and the immanent, he captures a central concern of the religious experience. The very same concern resonates powerfully in the work of Fazlur Rahman, specifically in his attempt to develop a Qur'ānic hermeneutic that is able to bridge the gap between eternal values and concerns and the vagaries of temporal existence.[23]

Theology – as is construed here – is thus tasked with responding to the totality of human creative self-interpretation in a specific context or time by emphasising the unchangeable truth of its message over and against the changing demands of any given situation.[24] With this in mind Tillich proposes two formal criteria of theology. The first criterion holds that:

> *The object of theology is what concerns us ultimately. Only those propositions are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of ultimate concern for us*[25]

Tillich indicates that social ideas, legal projects and political programs are all potentially objects of theology, not from the point of view of their social, legal, or political form, but in that they have the power of actualising some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately in and through their social, legal, and political forms.[26] By considering the content of our ultimate concerns, i.e., by questioning what concerns us unconditionally, we arrive at the second formal criterion of theology:

> *Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or non-being. Only those statements are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of being or not-being for us*[27]

Only that which has the power of saving or threatening our being can be of ultimate concern to us. Tillich explicitly points out that the term "being" means the whole of human reality, the structure, the meaning, and the aim of existence. In this context it does

not simply designate existence in time and space, which may be continuously threatened and saved by things and events that are ultimately of no concern to us. Theology therefore primarily addresses the question of being and, more specifically, that which is of ultimate concern to the believer. This brief exposition brings us closer to understanding the relationship between theology and philosophy. A workable definition of philosophy is now needed for a completely lucid exposition of the link between the two.

There have been many attempts to reduce philosophy to specific sub-disciplines that generally reflect the dominance of one method or school over another. For example, Neo-Kantian schools in the nineteenth century attempted to reduce philosophy to epistemology and ethics; in the twentieth century, the goal of logical positivism and related schools was to reduce it to logical calculus.[28] Tillich argues that both these attempts to avoid the ontological question have been unsuccessful.

He suggests that a far more modest approach to philosophy is to call it "*that cognitive approach to reality in which reality as such is the object*".[29] This is a far more encompassing definition that stresses *the* philosophical question:

> Reality as such, or reality as a whole, is not the whole of reality; it is the structure which makes reality a whole and therefore a potential object of knowledge. Inquiring into the nature of reality as such means inquiring into those structures, categories, and concepts which are presupposed in the cognitive encounter with every realm of reality. From this point of view philosophy is by definition critical. It separates the multifarious materials of experience from

> those structures which make experience possible. There is no difference in this respect between constructive idealism and empirical realism. The question regarding the character of the general structures that make experience possible is always the same. It is *the* philosophical question.[30]

The crux of Tillich's argument is that because philosophy asks the question of reality as a whole, it is compelled to answer in ontological terms. The ontological question is unavoidable, even if this is denied by any of the philosophical schools. He categorically affirms that every epistemology contains an implicit ontology "[s]ince knowing is an act which participates in being or, more precisely, in an "ontic relation," every analysis of the act of knowing must refer to an interpretation of being".[31] The importance of framing philosophy in ontological terms is that it avoids the grievous error of masking what is of ultimate importance. Philosophy as epistemology is overly concerned with the nature and criteria of knowledge at the expense of its existential implications.

From this perspective the link between philosophy and theology is clearly manifest. Both disciplines converge on the question of reality as a whole. They as such question the structure of being thereby according primacy to ontological concerns.[32] It must be acknowledged that the two disciplines converge as well as diverge in the manner in which they address the question of being, but what is of importance to us is that they effectively ask the same question.

The implications of raising the question of being are far-reaching and of central importance to freeing contemporary philosophical discourse from the stranglehold of

epistemology. The reduction of philosophy to epistemology fails to address our ultimate concerns, which can only be achieved by lending primacy to ontology. An added consequence of raising the question of being is that it forces those operating within epistemological paradigms to firstly acknowledge and then to interrogate the implicit ontologies articulated by these paradigms. Only then can one truly begin to assess the value systems upon which any given paradigm is founded because – as argued earlier – all ontologies ascribe modes of existence that relate directly to what is of ultimate concern to the knowing subject. Conceptions of the self are thereby far more clearly articulated because our ultimate concerns define who we are, not just existentially, but morally as well.

What is being suggested is that there is a direct relationship between conceptions of the self and moral action and, similar to the case of epistemology, all moral actions also re-affirm a given ontology. This will now be discussed in detail by addressing the relationship between ontology and human agency.

3. Ontology and Human Agency

Much of our discussion thus far has been focused on emphasising the implicit ontologies underlying any given epistemological paradigm. Far from simply being an abstract exercise in philosophical theorisation, this has direct bearing upon everyday human behavior. The insights grasped thus far must now be put into the service of addressing the moral postures and dilemmas encountered by us as human agents. This would require

exploring the relationship between ontology and human agency, i.e. the relationship between sense of being and individual action and behavior.

I will argue that actions and judgement predicates are informed by a certain moral ontology indicative of who we are, even if this ontology remains largely implicit. What this clearly suggests is that moral agency is a basic component of the self.

The above also suggests that identity is ultimately defined in moral space. It cannot be otherwise, since our moral reactions reflect what is of paramount importance to us. Stated differently, it may be said that moral discrimination is driven by what concerns us ultimately. Therefore, any given worldview is no more than a specific ontological framework constructed in moral space. This clearly expresses the link between identity and morality. Tracing notions of what individuals regard as good helps us to effectively map out the evolution of human agency and related conceptions of selfhood. It also effectively demonstrates the fact that the affirmation of certain goods necessarily involves discriminating against – if not completely rejecting – contrary conceptions of the good.

Drawing attention to ontology thus goes a long way in dispelling notions of moral relativism. In terms of our actions and judgement predicates, the view that any given notion of what is good is equally valid to an opposing counterpart is patently false. Consequently, when we are faced with two options we always incline towards one, even if we may not be vociferously opposed to the other alternative. Our choices as such speak

a lot about our moral proclivities, even if our actions remain strictly *laissez-faire*. Moral relativism must therefore ultimately be regarded as an impossibility. Attention will now be devoted to explaining these assertions in sufficient detail.

3.1 Moral agency as a basic component of the self

The work of Charles Taylor is acknowledged as the best starting point for recovering a strong and crucial understanding of the self as moral subject.[33] Durkheim had made the development of a sociology of morality central to his intellectual mission about a century ago, but felt that in order to rescue moral discourse he had to displace the individual:

> Morality turned, he argued, not on individuals' variant faculties, nor on moral choice as an exercise of free will, but on social processes more basic than individuals. The effect of a moral order was produced directly by social causes.[34]

In sheer contrast to Durkheim, Taylor aims "to place the construction of the person back in the center of moral thought [.] Taylor's claim is not that the self – the person, identity – is prior to morality, but rather that it is constituted in and through the taking of moral stances".[35] He laments the fact that the connections between senses of the self and moral visions have been obscured by the moral philosophies dominant today. It is therefore necessary to restate the relation between self and morals.[36]

Taylor argues that what is normally described as the 'moral' encompasses far more than our notions and reactions pertaining to justice, well-being, dignity, and respect of other people's life. In addition to this external orientation he also stresses an inward turn: we

need to examine what underlies our own dignity and question what makes our lives meaningful or fulfilling as well.[37] Most of our moral intuitions are so uncommonly deep, powerful, and universal that Taylor feels we may be tempted to think of them as rooted in instinct. These universal moral reactions need to be contrasted with those that seem to be very much the consequence of upbringing and education. Taylor therefore asserts that our moral reactions have two facets:

> On one side, they are almost like instincts, comparable to our love of sweet things, or our aversion to nauseous substances, or our fear of falling; on the other hand they seem to involve claims, implicit or explicit, about the nature and status of human beings. From this second side, a moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of, a given ontology of the human.[38]

It is from the second facet that we are able to grasp the centrality of moral agency as a basic component of the self. In this regard Taylor argues that ontological accounts have the status of articulations of our moral instincts as they articulate the claims implicit in our reactions. For him our deepest moral instincts are to be treated as our modes of access to the world in which ontological claims are discernible and can be rationally argued about and sifted.[39] He is however careful to point out that the moral ontology behind any person's views can remain largely implicit. In this regard, many people would be hard pressed to choose when faced with both theistic and secular ontologies – for example – as the grounds for any specific moral reaction. What is of greater importance is acknowledging that one or another ontology is in fact the only adequate basis for our moral responses.[40]

Therefore, ontological consciousness – or sense of being – impacts directly upon human agency, determining one's orientation in moral space. However, our conceptions of self do not only constitute the core of our moral responses; they represent an ontology that forges an important component of our identities as well. As such, we must now explore notions of the good to elicit a deeper understanding of our multi-faceted identities. Here too, one finds a strong link between identity and morality, and therefore, recognition of the impact of ontology upon human agency.

3.2 The link between identity and morality

I have suggested earlier that identity is ultimately defined in moral space, and therefore, any given worldview is nothing other than a specific ontological framework constructed in this space. The importance of such frameworks is central to Taylor's conceptualisation of identity:

> Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions, or reactions in any of the three dimensions. To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses. That is, when we try to spell out what it is that we presuppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral obligations in a certain manner, we find ourselves articulating inter alia what I have been calling here 'frameworks'. [...] The claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood.[41]

These concerns may be brought more sharply into focus by raising the question of identity. Taylor is categorical in asserting that the question 'who am I?' cannot be addressed by giving name and genealogy. The only compelling response is to answer in terms of what is of crucial importance to us:

> My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.[42]

Therefore, identity is reducible to the question of what is good, whether this is expressed in spiritual, nationalistic, or even anarchistic terms. This is not to suggest that people are always able to clearly articulate this framework. Situations do arise in which there may be "an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand." An 'identity crisis', therefore, is much more about a loss of significance.

Taylor therefore argues that this brings to light the essential link between identity and a kind of orientation:

> To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.[43]

Far from simplistic reductionism, Taylor is also careful to indicate that our identities are complex and many-tiered. One is framed by what is seen as universally valid (like belonging to a specific religion) as well as by particular identifications (along nationalistic lines, for example). But "we often declare our identity as defined by only one of these, because this is what is salient in our lives, or what is put in question". Taylor's argument is premised on the fact that "the human agent exists in a space of questions. And these are the questions to which our framework-definitions are answers, providing the horizon within which we know where we stand, and what meanings things have for us".[44]

In summary, Taylor argues that "all human beings act within moral frameworks which enable them to make qualitative distinctions among goods. [...] Commitment to certain "higher," or more basic, goods provide us with the capacity to locate ourselves, to establish an identity, and to determine the significance of various events or things for us. These "hypergoods" or "constitutive goods" [as Taylor calls them] may not be the same for everyone, but everyone must have some".[45]

For Taylor, "hypergoods" act as very important discriminatory tools that enable us to undertake "strong evaluations" involving "discriminations of right and wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged".[46] What this means is that "to act within a moral framework is to act with a "sense" of qualitative distinction in which some basic evaluative commitments orient the

rest of one's views and choices", and as such, "we know who we are only by knowing where we stand".[47]

It thus becomes apparent that identity and morality go hand in hand. Embedded under what the individual regards as "hypergoods" is an accurate portrait of the self. The consequence of this discovery is the realisation that affirming certain goods necessarily involves discriminating against – or even rejecting – contrary conceptions of the good. This brings into serious question the pluralistic posturing so prevalent in contemporary philosophical discourse. It is therefore to proving the ultimate impossibility of moral relativism that we must now turn.

3.3 The impossibility of moral relativism

Taylor's thesis on hypergoods is potentially a serious source of conflict, as he openly acknowledges, simply because affirming what one regards as the "highest good" necessarily involves discriminating against 'lower goods':

> An ethical outlook organized around a hypergood [is] inherently conflictual and in tension. The highest good is not only ranked above the other recognized goods of society; it can in some cases challenge and reject them, as the principal of equal respect has been doing to the goods and virtues connected with traditional family life, as Judaism and Christianity did to the cults of pagan religions, and as the author of the *Republic* did to the goods and virtues of agonistic citizen life. And that is why recognizing a hypergood is a source of tension and of often grievous dilemmas in moral life.[48]

In response, Taylor acknowledges only two "extreme" strategies whereby all dilemmas can be avoided. The first is to deny entirely the credentials of any good that stands in the way of the hypergood. As opposed to this, the other possible strategy is to affirm all goods, which necessarily translates as a rejection of hypergoods.[49] Taylor has compellingly argued the merits of hypergoods, viewing them as moral frameworks that form an integral component of the self and, therefore, to deny these frameworks is to effectively deny the moral agency of the self. This is exactly what the second alternative implies, and exactly why Taylor is opposed to it. It affirms a moral relativism – or neutrality – that is simply not tenable.

Affirming all goods – the second alternative – permeates much of contemporary philosophic thought. This mode of thought

> wants us to think of our moral reactions outside of any sense-making context, as on all fours with visceral reactions like nausea. On a more sophisticated level, we have the picture of values as projections on a neutral world, something which we normally though unconsciously live within but could perhaps abstain from.[50]

The above perspective curries much favour in postmodernist circles. "Derrida and Foucault want to disclaim any notion of the good. Certainly Nietszche rejected the Enlightenment ethic of benevolence, [although] it is much less clear that he rejected all accounts of the good".[51] More specifically, Nietszche's offensive against hypergoods was mounted in an attempt to "break out of the whole form of thought he defined as 'moral', i.e., all forms which involve the rejection of the supposedly "lower" in us, of our will to

power.[...] Neo-Nietszchean thinkers have extended this critique and tried to show how various forms of social exclusion and domination are built into the very definitions by which a hypergood perspective is constituted, as certain models of religious order excluded and dominated women, as ideals and disciplines of rational control excluded and dominated the lower classes (as well as women again), as definitions of health and fulfillment exclude and marginalise dissidents, as other notions of civilization exclude subject races, and so on".[52]

Taylor is able to rebut the neo-Nietszchean onslaught by drawing attention to the fact that their critiques do not ultimately disprove the notion of the hypergood, but simply replace one hypergood with another. For example, Derrida and Foucault are ultimately celebrating the potential freedom and power of the self when they disclaim any notion of the good; yet, as Taylor would have it, this is still a hypergood even if it passes remarkably unrecognised.[53] As he explains: "the very claim not to be oriented by a notion of the good is one which seems [...] incredible [...]. But it also reflects that the underlying ideal is some variant of that most invisible, because it is the most pervasive, of all modern goods, unconstrained freedom".[54]

Taylor thus dismisses the neo-Nietszchean perspective – along with that of its "empiricist cousins" – as "deeply implausible":

> The point of view from which we might constate that all orders are equally arbitrary, in particular that all moral views are equally so, is just not available to us humans. It is a form of self-delusion to think that we do not speak from a moral orientation which we take to be

> right. This is a condition of being a functioning self, not a metaphysical view we can put on or off. So the meta-construal of the neo-Nietszchean philosopher – 'in holding my moral position, I am imposing (or collaborating in the imposition of) a regime of truth on the chaos, and so does everyone' – is just as impossible as the meta-construal of the empiricist – 'in holding my moral position, I am projecting values on a neutral world of facts, and so does everyone'. Both are incompatible with the way we cannot but understand ourselves in the actual practices which constitute holding that position: our deliberations, our serious assessments of ourselves and others. They are not construals you could actually make of your life while living it. They clash, in other words, with the best available [BA] account of our moral life. And what meta-considerations can overrule our best account of our actual moral experience? The neo-Nietszchean position falls afoul of the BA principle, just as the crasser forms of naturalism do.[55]

Because Taylor's analysis is ontological to the very core, he is able to effectively refute the more superficial accounts that assert positions of moral neutrality, simply by unmasking the moral biases inherent in such accounts. Ultimately, moral agency is undeniable – as has been argued earlier – because it is an integral component of the self.

Our meandering journey along the ontological turn has thus far stressed the primacy of ontology over epistemology arguing that all ontologies ascribe modes of existence that relate directly to what is of ultimate concern to the knowing subject. We then drew attention to the influence of ontological self-perception upon human agency and morality arguing that similar to the case of epistemology, all moral actions also re-affirm a given ontology. The increasingly broader focus now requires that we examine the ontological underpinnings of the Islamic thought paradigm in general, contrasting it with that of the

Western-secular paradigm, so that we may finally begin developing a sense of the unique natures of each paradigm. Only then will we be able to authoritatively address the issue of Islamic authenticity once again, and finally grasp what understanding it in terms of ontological self-perception really entails.

4. The Ontological Underpinnings of Islam and Secularism

Thus far no distinction has been drawn between identity and self-perception, even though the term identity has been utilised as a very conscious, well-articulated concept more akin to self-perception. However, on closer analysis it is not difficult to grasp that the term identity implies a strong social bearing, while self-perception is clearly suggestive of a very personal, inner feeling. It is therefore not improbable to argue that identity and self-perception are "two different states of consciousness," as is suggested by the Turkish philosopher, Ahmet Davutoglu:

> Identity, in a relational sense, might be seen as a way of social recognition which needs two parties; while self-perception is purely a consciousness of individuality. An identity might be given or imposed by some authorities and therefore may be arbitrary and artificially dependent on other social and political factors [...]. Self-perception necessarily implies an identity while the opposite is not always true. An identity might be transformed into a self-perception only if it fits the authentic internalised elements of the personality.[56]

This distinction is necessary in order to be able to compare and contrast the ontological underpinnings of Islamic and Western secular paradigms. When we speak about the ontological consciousness implied in Islamic and secular identity, it must be understood

as an identity that has internalised the authentic elements of these paradigms – and accurately reflects them – as a social or group identity. This in no way suggests the existence of a completely homogenous social collective with no dissenting strands, but rather emphasises the two paradigmatic cases so as to draw out their core distinctions and differences.

Davutoglu pays considerable attention to the differences between Islam and Secularism from an ontological perspective.[57] We have thus far emphasised the importance of ontology in the personal sphere, that of articulating conceptions of the self and morality; Davutoglu stretches this importance even further. He argues – with specific regard to Muslim experience – that ontological existence lends itself to a more fruitful analysis if taken even further:

> Consciousness of ontological existence and of its meaning in the political and social sphere are the most critical issues if a comparison is to be made between the Islamic and Western tradition [...]. Ontological consciousness demands an understanding of the self in its triadic relations with God, the universe and other human beings. In pantheistic and materialistic worldviews, for example, there is an identification of God and the universe which conditions ontological consciousness of the self. Such an analysis of the dimensions of the ontological consciousness of the self provides the foundation for understanding the formative parameters of civilisational self-perception in Western and Islamic civilisations. The philosophical and political process of secularisation and its consequences are reflections of these imaginations of civilisational self-perceptions [i.e., identities].[58]

Davutoglu thus conceives of the Western paradigm (which he equates with ontological proximity) and the Islamic paradigm (which he equates with absolute monotheism) as two alternative bases, reflecting two alternative modes of ontological consciousness that "directly influence the imaginative and theoretical link between ontological and socio-political existence".[59] Each of these paradigms will now be examined individually.

4.1 The Western paradigm: deification of the self

The institutionalisation of economic and political systems represents a means of achieving what is essentially a fundamental human objective throughout history: the attainment of ontological security and freedom.[60] The western secular paradigm is but the most recent example of this perennial endeavor. Facilitating a lucid understanding of this paradigm requires a brief examination of the genesis of modern notions of freedom and the ensuing ontological implications. This will be followed by a critical assessment of some of the problems spawned by this paradigm.

Modern notions of freedom are characteristically different from ancient conceptions that set a standard for us in nature, independent of our will, be it the Platonic notion of cosmic order or the Aristotelian concept of the good life. The modern notion, which developed in the seventeenth century, emphasises the independence of the subject, with freedom of purpose and no interference from an external authority.[61] As Taylor explains:

> Late mediaeval nominalism defended the sovereignty of God as being incompatible with there being an order in nature which by itself defined good and bad. For that would be to tie God's hands, to infringe on his sovereign right of decision about what was good. This line of

> thought even contributed in the end to the rise of mechanism: the ideal universe from this point of view is a mechanical one, without intrinsic purpose. But with the modern era, something analogous begins to be transferred onto humans. Normative orders must originate in the will.[62]

This new conception of freedom arises from an "anthropological transfer of the prerogatives of God" as Taylor argues, and therefore, can be seen to represent the first steps towards deification of the self. The creative energies unleashed by 'self-deification' brought about significant institutional growth and reform. Even though such reforms impacted tremendously upon society, Davutoglu insightfully notes that the real transformatory character of this modern era was not institutional but rather imaginative – as alluded to by Taylor – in that it represented a new cosmological, epistemological and ontological framework:

> This transformatory imagination formed the conditions in the West which in turn brought about ontological freedom as expressed in the magical formula of "reason-science-progress" of the Age of Enlightenment. Reason was accepted as the source of ontological freedom, science as the material tool and form; and progress as the deterministic future. So, western man deified himself and violated the authoritative character of the Christian concept of God and its institutionalized doctrine. Liberalism was the ideological guarantee for this concept of freedom while the Industrial Revolution was its material reflection as a tremendous "success". The feeling in the first phase of industrial revolution that man could control everything through his new slaves, namely machines, accelerated the prescientism of the idea of unilinear progress in that human beings would enjoy a paradise of absolute freedom in the future as an outcome of the unavoidable progress. This understanding reached its zenith in

> the 19th century. This Euro-Christian psychology of a secular paradise on earth was the motivating impetus for colonialism.[63]

That the root paradigms of Western secularism are imaginative and not institutional cannot be over-emphasised. Its two support pillars – "ontological proximity" and "particularisation" – must now be further elaborated upon.[64] Davutoglu explains that particularisation of divinity in ancient mythology and Christian theology, led ultimately to a proximity and identification on the ontological level between God, man and nature.[65] Any conceptualisation of the divine (whether as inanimate idol, Trinitarian divinity, or force of nature) that ultimately compromises the absolute uniqueness of a God that transcends all, is rendered malleable. Such a conception is within the reach of the human imagination, which easily transforms it as it pleases, since the divide between self-conception and the divine is not really that wide. It is therefore the ontological proximity so firmly rooted within the Western paradigm through particularisation of the divine that ultimately facilitated the transition from an external divinity to the deification of the self. This was obviously effected over a considerable period of time so a brief exploration of this evolution is well warranted at this point.

The idea of God forms the core of Western religion, representing a centre of being or *presence* around which a series of subcentres orbit, functioning to hold the ultimate centre in place.[66] The human agent is a perfect example of a subcentre because the believer acknowledges and affirms the presence of the divine as the centre of being. However, the de-centering of the divine, i.e., the shifting of presence from beyond the self to within it, and the ultimate denial of presence altogether, is what marks the

evolution from belief in God to self-deification or unbelief. This process of de-centering – the journey from the affirmation of presence to its ultimate denial – can be traced in the evolution of thought from St Augustine, to Descartes, to Derrida.

Taylor draws to our attention the importance of the Augustinian tradition in the turn "inward" and its impact upon Cartesian thought.[67] For Augustine, presence of the divine is acknowledged through the individual's recognition of a lack of self-sufficiency. Through this recognition the person comes to see more and more that God acts within him. Therefore for Augustine, "the path inward was only a step on the way upward".[68] Although the Augustinian tradition takes the reflexive turn in no uncertain terms, it still very strongly affirms the position of God at the centre of being and the individual as a subcentre that acknowledges the divine presence. A very important transposition of this tradition takes place in Descartes' thought.

As Taylor notes, Descartes also proves the existence of God starting from the self-understanding of the thinking agent, but with an extremely important contrast. In the Cartesian construct the "whole point of the reflexive turn is to achieve a quite self-sufficient certainty".[69] While it must be acknowledged that the chain of reasoning shows that the individual does rely on a veracious God for his/her knowledge of the external world, there is still a notable difference from the traditional Augustinian order of dependence:

> The thesis is not that I gain knowledge when turned towards God in faith. Rather the certainty of clear and distinct perception is unconditional and self-generated. What has happened is

> rather that God's existence has become a stage in *my* progress towards science through the methodical ordering of evident insight. God's existence is a theorem in *my* system of perfect science. The centre of gravity has decisively shifted.[70]

This then, is the crucial step: the evolution from the Augustinian paradigm to the Cartesian one involves a decisive shifting of the centre from the transcendent to the self. As a result, divine presence is subverted by self-presence. As Taylor explains:

> The step from the imperfect self to a perfect God, so essentially Augustinian in its source, is in the process of mutating into something else. It is not carried out so as to make God appear at the very roots of the self, closer than my own eye. On the contrary, it is the sure *inference*, from powers that I can become quite certain of possessing, to their inescapable source. The Cartesian proof is no longer a search for an encounter with God within. It is no longer the way to an experience of everything in God. Rather what I now meet is myself: I achieve a clarity and a fullness of self-presence that was lacking before.[71]

The effect of this self-presence was not an immediate rejection of God, but rather the emergence of a conception of God that very much depended on reason. As Taylor expresses it, the road to Deism was at this point opened, even if not yet taken. But the path not taken was to become well-worn in the modern period, etching out its own radical branch: "this new conception of inwardness, an inwardness of self-sufficiency, of autonomous powers of ordering by reason, *also* prepared the ground for modern unbelief".[72] With the onset of Derridian analysis we finally encounter denial of the possibility of presence. This assertion is boldly conveyed in Derrida's now infamous statement: "there exists nothing outside of texts".[73] The history of metaphysics, Derrida

asserts, is nothing more than the determination of "Being as *presence*".[74] His repudiation of anything beyond the text[i] is essentially a rejection of 'being as presence'. It is an attempt to show that "it is only the text that speaks, not some prior and external origin or presence".[75]

The transition from external divinity to self-deification through particularisation of the divine can be summed up as follows: The metaphysics of presence asserts a centre of authority, a source of meaning and significance, whereas self-presence divests all authority from an external source and places it in the hands of the knowing subject; the denial of presence altogether challenges the very notion of authority. This final step in the evolution of the Western ontological paradigm is what ultimately leads to crisis; the deified-self has to face the reality of its own limits, and therefore question its own divinity.

Davutoglu admits that secularisation contains a strong egalitarianist slant due to its elimination of the semi-divine ontological category of the clergy. However, he also emphatically insists that as a consequence of ontological proximity this category was able to continue in secular form:

> In short, God died in secular/Western imagination, but semi-divine or super-human beings continued to survive either as an ontologico-theological or as an ontologico-philosophical image.[76]

[i] It must be noted that the term "text" is employed here as a metaphor of that which signifies an external locus. Therefore, just as the literary text implies the existence of an author, nature could be viewed as a 'text' that signifies a Creator, etc. Derrida, as is apparent from his statement, rejects this notion.

He thus asserts that the myth of Narsissus' worship of his own appearance has been reinvented as a new pure form of secular ontology. This secular ontology, however, must confront two major dilemmas. The first has been alluded to above: "the inner clash between narcissistic self-assertion and the limits of physical capability".[77] Davutoglu explains that ontological insecurity arises when the narcissist confronts the frustration of observing the clash between his/her superego and the physical limits of the self.

The second dilemma of secular ontology concerns the legitimacy of moral values and impacts more on society than on the self. As Davutoglu explains, "objective moral values lose their binding character when they are linked to the narcissistic self-perception of the subject who wants to maximise his ontological security and freedom. So, this narcissistic self-perception creates its own threat and anxiety. A moral dearth becomes inevitable as a consequence of this dilemma".[78] Society suffers as a result because – as Davutoglu explains – discrimination, racism and ethnic cleansing can only be justified by means of a narcissistic self-perception:

> The concepts of 'chosen nation', 'white man's burden', 'west-rest', 'white-black' are all reflections of the subject-oriented and value-free self-identity of secular ontology: the ultimate version of ontological proximity. This is the most fundamental dilemma of the secular foundations of Western democracies.[79]

Having explored the Western paradigm and its underlying mode of ontological consciousness, we must now briefly turn to the Islamic paradigm, subjecting it to similar analysis.

4.2 The Islamic paradigm: absolute monotheism

The critical divergence between the Islamic and Western traditions is effected by the absence of the two support pillars that hold up Western secularism, namely ontological proximity and particularisation. These two root paradigms are alien to Muslim ontological consciousness and self-perception.[80] Davutoglu attributes this absence to the absolute monotheistic character of the Islamic belief system which

> prevented ontological proximity and the emergence of any intermediary ontological category [...]. In Islamic ontological consciousness neither church nor state can have divine status as an intermediary ontological category. Equally, there also cannot be absolute ontological particularisation among divine beings with its reflection in socio-political separation [...] between church and state.[81]

The Islamic paradigm is characterised by a hierarchy in which the internal consistency of its belief structure and its social reflections are "natural consequences of the interdependent relationship between the imaginations of being (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), value (axiology) and institutions (social cosmology).[82] The religious and historic experience of Muslim societies – Davutoglu explains – are attributable to four[ii] significant counterparts to the Islamic paradigm of ontological hierarchy and unity:

> first, the direct, well-defined, easily understandable ontological and epistemological relationship between God and man in the form of a revealed text; second, the rational/human

[ii] The first three of these aspects relate directly to the Qurʾān and will be given significant attention in the next chapter.

> tradition of the re-interpretation of this revelation through a methodology of individual and collective rationality embodied in the consensus of the community; third, the historicity of both the revealed text and the religious leadership of prophecy; and fourth, a firm link between the ontological and socio-political levels of existence of the individual. The four factors form the basis of a rational legitimation process in Islamic civilisation, which prevented both the emergence of a sacred clergy and consequently secular exclusion of religion.[83]

Another significant departure from the Western paradigm is Islam's unique understanding of freedom. Both traditions conceive understandings of freedom from their conceptions of the self, but because of the marked difference between the Islamic and Western imagination, the resultant notions of freedom are also very different. As Davutoglu explains, " the Qur'ānic conceptualization and specification of the ontological status of man in his relationship with Allah as the Creator and nature as the environment of existence influences both the individual consciousness as well as the man-man relationship in social life".[84] It is this self-perception that directly influences the Islamic concept of ontological security and freedom:

> Freedom within the Islamic framework is not power-dependent but a natural state of consciousness. Therefore, it is neither merely a relative phenomenon of being equal or superior to others nor an outcome of the power struggle for the exploitation of natural forces by artificial mechanisms. It is basically a spiritual subject of the self-conscious being. The ontological security can only be achieved if this spirituality of freedom becomes a social form of ethics. Belief is not the dogma of an institutionalized power like the church because the Holy Qur'ān addresses itself to each individual being rather than to a selected nation or group of scholars[85]

This very brief but important exposition of the Islamic and Western secular paradigms very strongly reflects the irreconcilability of both the philosophical and theoretical bases of these two alternative worldviews. Davutoglu succinctly captures the main contrasting features of the two paradigms as follows:

> The originality of the Islamic paradigm is related to its theocentric ontology based on the belief of *tawhid* [monotheism] supported by the principle of *tanzih* [transcendence]. The differentiation of ontological levels via ontological hierarchy and ontologically defined epistemology are the cornerstones of the process from its *imago mundi* to the axiological foundations of political images and culture. The Western paradigm around proximity of ontological levels through a particularisation of divinity supported by intrinsically polytheist and pantheist elements, is the philosophical origin of the secularisation of life via rationalistic axiology. This is a specific character of the Western philosophical tradition based on epistemologically-defined ontology which has led to a relativised and subjectivised religion.[86]

We have argued earlier – in the discussion on the epistemological turn – that a major shortcoming of the Western philosophical tradition has been the tremendous emphasis placed upon epistemology. Davutoglu obviously concurs with this view as is apparent from his belief that it leads to a "relativised and subjectivised religion." Therefore, much of our analysis has been concerned with emphasising the importance of ontological underpinnings, which serve as a far truer benchmark for comparison.

The entire purpose of such a close examination of both paradigms is not to stress their irreconcilability but rather to reflect upon their uniqueness and difference. This however,

takes us back to the question of authenticity once again. We began by stating what authenticity *is not* and it is now necessary to finally express what authenticity *is*.

5. *Defining Islamic Authenticity*

The most important consequence of ignoring the ontological underpinnings of contemporary discourse has been the prevailing tendency to underplay notions of authentic and original culture and identity. Contemporary social theorists like Trinh Minh-Ha, Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall all claim that the individuals' daily interactions constitute their cultural expressions.[87] For example, Khan demonstrates that Bhabha's notion of hybridised subjectivity in the third space is an attempt to explain how individuals negotiate the contradictory demands and polarities of their lives:

> By disrupting the concept of original and homogenous culture, Bhabha's theory of third space unsettles a pattern of meaning constituted in serial time and challenges the articulation of culture as a homogenizing unifying force authenticated by the originary past and kept alive in the national tradition of the people. Instead Bhabha points out that individuals construct their culture from national as well as religious texts and often transform them into Western symbols, signifiers of technology, language, or dress.[88]

Bhabha is correct in challenging the notion of homogenous culture and in suggesting that authenticity is not only something located in what is described above as "the originary past." He is also correct in suggesting that identity is multi-faceted. However, he misses the importance of privileging that which constitutes the essence of the self as the primary

marker of identity. As has been alluded to earlier, it is our ultimate concerns that determine who we are. Identity has thus become the key issue of our times and cannot be underplayed or disguised by opaque notions like Bhabha's "hybridised subjectivity." The centrality of identity is made apparent by the fact that institutions and individuals no longer speak only from within the narratives of nation, since their landscape and networks of life have shifted beyond the nation state and are influenced by the different modalities of globalisation processes within which such discourses are articulated.[89] A prime example is how Islamic authenticity is cogently articulated in the context where Muslims have migrated to the West, and where Islam has become a source of identity formation.[90]

A second strand in contemporary thought attempts to equate authenticity with authority. Such an equation has a strong element of truth to it but is also potentially problematic. A religious tradition, for example, would ideally not have to compel its adherents to submit to its requirements since they accept its teachings and strive to embody them. In this instance authority emanates from authenticity. The equation however becomes problematic when religious authenticity is viewed simply as a function of state power, for example.[91] Equating authenticity with state authority in such a blatant manner is tantamount to denying individual agency. This criticism should not however be understood as a denial of the possible bias of the state towards a certain worldview, religious tradition, or ideology. What is strongly being rejected is the denial of a conception of authenticity that emanates from within the subjective self.

Such misconceptions arise only because of the failure to recognise that authenticity is about the uniqueness of being, bound by time/space.[92] This was alluded to earlier by suggesting that authenticity must be understood in terms of ontological self-perception. We must now explain this in sufficient detail. Much of what has been said thus far has been directed with this objective in mind.

With regards to Islam, Davutoglu points out that it has had to confront three significant civilisational challenges in its history, namely the Crusades, the Mongol invasion, and the colonial expansion of Western civilisation.[93] He notes that the first two challenges were military threats that may have destroyed elements of the physical and written legacy of Islam, but the main spiritual, intellectual and cultural parameters continued to survive in strengthened form. However, the European challenge in the modern era, and its political consequences in the form of the international colonial system represented a challenge in all spheres, and therefore, a threat to Islamic authenticity.

> Secularisation in Western civilisation has redefined the ontological and historic *stance* which guarantees the continuity of civilisational substance. The autocratic transfer of this process to non-Western societies, on the other hand, has destroyed the traditional stance without replacing it with a new one. Thus, the most critical aspect of the process of secularisation is the impact on the *stance* of an individual human being related to his self-consciousness (ontological existence) and to his time-consciousness (historical existence) [...]. Autocratic modernisation strategies tried to impose on the masses a new self-consciousness and time-consciousness through institutional, political, economic and educational machinery. This has exacerbated the question of the 'divided self' in the sphere of self-consciousness and the question of historic existentiality in the sphere of time-consciousness. The revival of

> authentic civilisations is, in fact, a natural response to restore a 'new stance' which proves the ontological and historical existentiality of non-Western humanity[94]

As such, most of what has been argued thus far may be viewed as an exercise in retrieval. I have articulated how the individual self is conceptualised in terms of its ultimate concerns, and then compared and contrasted two portraits of the self that are essentially the products of different worldviews. This comparison reflects the tensions that exist between the dominant Western paradigm and other muted alternatives – like the Islamic paradigm – that are struggling to assert themselves. This in itself shows that at the very core of what we regard as authentic is an image of the self, shaped by our higher moral ideals.[95]

However, there is one final consideration that has to be addressed: why is the self defined in terms of values or morals that emanate from beyond, and not just in terms of its own desires? In this regard Taylor draws attention to differentiating between "authentic moral contact with ourselves" and "self-determining freedoms." The first implies, among other things, that "I am free to do what I want without interference by others because that is compatible with my being shaped and influenced by society and its laws of conformity"; the second "demands that I break the hold of all such external impositions, and decide for myself alone".[96] The crucial difference between authenticity and self-determining freedoms is that the latter "implicitly denies the existence of a pre-existing horizon of significance, whereby some things are worthwhile and others less so, and still others not at all, quite anterior to choice".[97] As Taylor so lucidly points out, the general lesson is that authenticity can't be defended in ways that collapse horizons of significance.

> Even the sense that the significance of my life comes from its being chosen – the case where authenticity is actually grounded on self-determining freedom – depends on the understanding that *independent of my will* there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life [...]. Unless some options are more significant than others, the very idea of self-choice falls into triviality and hence incoherence.[98]

All of this makes sense in light of what has been argued earlier. In order to live meaningful and significant lives we have to exist in a horizon of important questions, that is, we have to consider what is of ultimate importance to us. Taylor affirms this by noting that to shut out demands emanating beyond the self is precisely to suppress the conditions of significance, and hence to court trivialisation.

> Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. *Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.*[99]

Very simply stated then, Islamic authenticity refers to the ideal Muslim self-image, shaped by the eternal morals and values of the Islamic belief system. Understanding authenticity in terms of ontological self-perception therefore accords primacy to the eternal and the unchanging over the temporal and mutable.

6. *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have argued that in order to understand the foundations of any given intellectual discourse primacy must be given to ontological concerns because they permeate all aspects of human existence. So-called 'empirical' epistemologies are not value-free because even they conceal implicit ontologies that – when uncovered – reveal the biases and preferences of the human agent. Therefore, ontology impacts just as much upon science as it does upon morality.

Focus has been concentrated more on the role of ontology in human agency. I have argued that there is a direct relationship between conceptions of the self and moral action, and that moral choices affirm a given ontology. By then exploring the ontological underpinnings of Western and Islamic paradigms I have tried to show that they differ due to the different ways in which they conceive of the self, and, as such, spawn very different worldviews. We are consequently presented with two very different, but nonetheless, authentic ideals. As has been noted earlier the Islamic authentic ideal has been marginalised and challenged by the more dominant Western-secular ideal. What is of central importance, though, is that both these ideals are shaped by concerns that emanate beyond the self.

We are now in a position to explore the source of the Islamic ideal, to explain the role the Qurʾān plays in shaping the ontological self-perception of its interlocutors. Only then will be able to understand its role as foundational text. This then, in brief, is the task we face in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER THREE

(Allah) Most Gracious! The One Who has Taught the Qur'ān, Who has created Humankind, has taught [them] speech (and intelligence). – **The Holy Qur'ān (Ch. 55: v. 1 - 4)**[1]

Sa'd b. Hisham said: I went to ʿĀ'isha and said, "Mother of the faithful, tell me about the nature of God's messenger." She asked, "Do you not recite the Qur'ān?" On my replying that I certainly did, she said, "The Prophet's nature was the Qur'ān" – **ʿĀ'isha Bint Abi Bakr**.[2]

The self neither preexists all conversation, as in the old monological view; nor does it arise from the introjection of the interlocutor; but it arises within conversation, because this kind of dialogical action by its very nature marks a place for the new locator who is being inducted into it. – **Charles Taylor**.[3]

1. Introduction

In this chapter the foundational text as metaphor must finally confront the foundational text as scripture. The Qur'ān as scripture is not only revered in Islam as being divinely inspired, but also acknowledged as the ultimate beacon, serving as guide in the perennial quest for self-fulfillment. As such, the *ideal* Islamic attitude towards the Qur'ān can best be described as one that conflates foundational text as metaphor with foundational text as scripture. The opening epigraphs are strongly suggestive of this and provide a useful thumb sketch of the path along which this chapter will proceed.

The verses quoted above open with the mention of God, followed by the Qur'ān that has been taught to humankind and whom God has endowed with speech and intelligence.

Careful consideration of the Qur'ānic Weltanschauung affirms that this is by no means a random statement of expression. Embedded within these four pithy verses is the entire metaphysical hierarchy of Islam. Understanding this hierarchy is the key to solving the problem of the metaphysical status of values in the Islamic tradition. Only once this is grasped will we be able to make sense of the Qur'ān as foundational text.

Therefore, one of the objectives of this chapter is to demonstrate that from an Islamic perspective the status of right and wrong is necessarily ontological. The committed Muslim does not create his or her own system of ethics, but submits to the moral dictates of God as expressed in the Qur'ān. This engaged submission is poignantly captured in the lived practice of the Prophet of Islam. As is related by his wife ʿĀ'īsha above, the Prophet was a living embodiment of the Qur'ānic ethic, and it is in this sense that Muslims aspire to imitate him, regarding his personality as the perfect model for emulation.

The challenge, then, is to engage and understand the Qur'ānic ethic, and strive to live by it. The question as to *how* this is achieved obviously arises. Responding to this concern is another central aim of this chapter. It will be argued that the Qur'ānic self-image is inculcated in the person through a dialogic process. Charles Taylor's comments above help facilitate our understanding of this process. Taylor cogently demonstrates that we – as moral subjects – are created in conversation. On this basis I will argue that the ontological ethic of the Qur'ān is conveyed through interlocution.

The previous chapter had focused on the role of ontology in human agency, arguing that moral choices affirm a certain ontology or state of being-in-the-world. It was also argued that Islamic authenticity has to be understood in terms of ontological self-perception. Therefore the main task of this chapter is to demonstrate how the Qur'ān – which is the primary source of the Islamic ideal – informs the ontological self-perception of its interlocutors.

In this chapter I will therefore proceed in the next section with a discussion on the role of the Qur'ān as foundational text. This entails elaborating upon the early status of the Qur'ān as the primary source of all values and the later subversion of this primacy, due to various reasons. A brief account of the displacement of the Qur'ān as foundational text is an absolute prerequisite to the central discussion on its re-emergence as the definitive ontological blueprint for Islamic ethics. This, then, will be the main focus of attention in the section that follows.

Any understanding of the relationship between the Qur'ān and ethical ontology must be predicated upon an inquiry into the status, role, and influence of speculative metaphysics in the Islamic tradition. This is the purpose of the third section of this chapter. In the previous chapter I have argued that one or another ontology is the only adequate basis for our moral responses. In this chapter I will elaborate on this position and demonstrate that for the nascent Muslim community the metaphysical status of right and wrong was necessarily ontological. It was only through the later influence of speculative metaphysics that the status of ethics was deontologised. I will rely on some of the ideas of prominent

contemporary philosophers in order to justify such ontological commitment in light of current trends in philosophy.

Arguing for the recognition of ethics as the only fixed ontological category in the Islamic value system requires addressing the permanent, fixed, or ahistorical aspects of Islamic discourse in relation to changing, in-flux, or historical aspects. Far from advocating a *literal* application of revelation insensitive to contextual or cultural factors, it will be argued in the fourth section that a system of ethics founded on ontologically rigid moral categories is flexible enough to adapt to ever-changing social realities. Once the boundaries of permanence and change have been established, we will be able to consider their implications upon the Qurʾān as foundational text.

The final section, therefore, will elaborate upon the role of the foundational text in the construction of the Ideal-Self. It will be argued that the human agent is predisposed to the ethical teachings of the Qurʾān through a process of interlocution. This dialogical relationship is a dynamic mechanism through which the person engages the ontological blueprint of values embedded within the Qurʾān. The level to which these values resonate within the individual-self is the final determinant of whether the person submits to the message of revelation or not. This process will be dealt with sufficiently in the last section. We must now turn our attention to the role of the Qurʾān as foundational text.

2. *The Qur'ān as Foundational Text*

The onset of Islam is best characterised as a moment of irruption brought about by the event of the Qur'ān. Muslims generally refer to the Qur'ān as the Holy Book or Scripture. Its impact upon history bears testimony to an influence that not only gave rise to a community of faithful, but defined an extremely deep and meaningful mode of existence as well. The nascent community, nurtured under the profound influence of the Qur'ān, grew into an empire that dominated world history for a significant period, spawning a civilisation that till today sustains and inspires people to embrace Islam as a response to ultimate concerns. The Qur'ān of the first generation, therefore, acted as foundational text in a sense synonymous with a grand or master narrative that informed all levels of existence, both sacred and profane.

It is in this penetrating sense that Fazlur Rahman refers to the revelations inspired to Muhammad as "the voice from the depths of life, speaking distinctly, unmistakably and imperiously".[4] The assertive power of the Qur'ān is not simply attributable to the belief concerning its divine origins. As Rahman explains, God's existence, as far as the Qur'ān is concerned, is strictly functional because it is not a treatise about God or His nature.[5] Humanity is the central concern of the Qur'ān, as it is either directly addressed to humans or is a discourse on human existence.[6] This very important attribute conveys upon the Qur'ān a universal significance because it is expressly addressed to all who are willing to listen.

From this perspective, a Muslim is simply one who submits to the teachings of the Qur'ān and affirms its authority. The Qur'ānic philosophy resonated strongly within the very beings of the Muslims of the first generation in this manner and thereby gave impetus to their spiritual and social existence.[7] In this formative period the event of the Qur'ān became the focal point of intellectual activity even amongst those who were not reconciled to its message. Any opposing inclination was invariably drawn into dialogue with the voice of revelation and the Qur'ān thus maintained a central position in the mind of the community.[8]

The Qur'ān thus occupied the most privileged of positions in the hearts and minds of the believers and could deservedly be accorded the status of foundational text, seeing that it served to inform and inspire all aspects of life. Al-Nashār elaborates on the centrality of the Qur'ān (in the formative period at least), arguing that the beginnings of Islamic thought may be traced back to the deep reflection effected by the Qur'ān. As such,

> Islamic Existence in its entirety is nothing but an elaboration of the Qur'ān. Pondering over the practical stipulations of the Qur'ān gave rise to jurisprudence; reflecting over it as a writ on metaphysics led to the development of dialectic theology; contemplating over it as a book [concerned with] the hereafter gave rise to mysticism, spirituality and ethics; deliberating over it as a book of laws gave rise to the science of governance; regarding its language as divine inspired the linguistic sciences, and so forth. The development of all the Islamic sciences should be approached from this perspective. They sprung forth and developed from the Qur'ānic purview and confronted the sciences of other cultures from this very same purview, either affirming them or rejecting them.[9]

However, in spite of the tremendous impact of the Qur'ān upon the earlier generations, history also bears stark testimony to the dwindling of its power to influence. Various factors contributed towards the displacement of the Qur'ān from its position of centrality within the Muslim psyche. Although there always were – and are still – many individuals who strove to walk in the shadow of the divine revelation, the shift from a Qur'ān that was completely internalised to one that was now somehow external to the Muslim-Self was gradually effected over time. The conception of Qur'ān as scripture slowly gained ascension over the initial impact of the Divine Voice directly experienced as an existential imperative. At this juncture the status of the Qur'ān as foundational text could critically be brought into question. Various influences, intellectual, social and political, impacted upon Islamic thought in a manner that compromised the ethical imperative of the Qur'ān.[10]

The role or specific impact of certain influences over others remains debatable, but what is of utmost importance is bearing in mind that it was most definitely overriding concerns such as power, the creation of a community, and the maintenance of an Islamic Political order that led to the dislocation of the Qur'ānic ethical imperative from the ultimate concerns of the Muslim community. In a more philosophical vein, it may be argued that the transitory ends and objectives of those in power in the Muslim community was able to displace the envisioned teleology of the Qur'ān so firmly embedded in the hearts and minds of the first-generation Muslims. It is this loss, more than any other, that was responsible for the subversion of the Qur'ān as foundational text and the resultant loss of meaning.

Fazlur Rahman, more than any other modern scholar, has been primarily concerned with recovering the ethical imperative of the Qurʾān. It is thus worth considering some of the reasons he puts forward for its loss, even if they are in some instances debatable. My concern is merely to clarify how the Qurʾānic ideal came to be subverted before going on to argue for the re-emergence of the Qurʾān as foundational text in contemporary times. Rahman has himself lamented the absence of a Qurʾān-centreed ethics in most of his works, outlining the reasons for this loss so as to facilitate its recovery.[11]

His last work, published posthumously, explores how various sects within Islam deviated from the Qurʾānic ideal.[12] Most of his attention is directed to the *Murjiʾah*, who attempted to take a neutral stance in the political and theological conflicts of the early Muslim community by withholding moral judgement. Rahman contends that this position in the end permeated the entire moral fabric of the community, having the disastrous effect of ethically desensitising Muslims:

> Mainstream Islamic theology, represented in the ʾAshʿari and Mātūrīdi schools, propagated *irjāʾ* [lit. postponement but signifying withholding of judgement] and made it the official doctrine. Ṣūfism, especially the pantheistic variety propagated by Ibn ʿArabi, made an even more far reaching contribution to this moral blindness and decline. While *irjāʾ* taught in effect that no sin no matter how grave could put a person beyond the pale, Ṣūfism destroyed the distinction between good and evil altogether.[13]

In addition to the Ṣūfis and the *Murjiʾah*, Rahman is also critical of sects like the *Qādarīyyah* who advocated the thesis of free will. He accuses them of pushing their

thesis to anti- Qur'ānic extremes when they denied any role to God whatsoever in the sphere of human moral action. "Similarly, they pushed their thesis of divine justice to such extremes that they denuded God of the power to forgive sinners".[14] Rahman is especially harsh in his denouncement of *Shīʿī* attitudes to the Qur'ān:

> The Shīʿī through the centuries showed little regard for the Qur'ān, despite producing a large number of commentaries. They have especially wrought havoc with their ecstatic and allegorical interpretations. The truth is while the Sunnis have imperceptibly but surely receded from the Qur'ān and the real legacy of the Prophet, the Shīʿī have cast the Qur'ān into systematic oblivion, and both disrupted and distorted the real legacy of Muhammad. But once the Imam is removed, what is left except the dry bones of the law and the intellectual husk that is *kalām* theology, which are common in both traditions. In the final analysis the only justification for the Shīʿī as a separate entity is purely negative: their anti-Sunnism.[15]

Rahman is thus categorical in his condemnation of any perceived deviation from the Qur'ānic ideal, thereby advocating a very precise conceptualisation of authentic Islam. He alludes to this in one of his earlier works where the Qur'ān and Sunnah are referred to as normative anchoring points. Not even the *Sharīʿah* or divine law, which modern scholars generally equate with correct Islam is to be accorded normative standing. The *Sharīʿah* has only a derivative status – both in concept and content – because it is purportedly deduced from the Qur'ān and Sunnah. Even less credible in terms of normativity is what some "learned Muslims" may believe to be "correct Islam," as such advocacy can only lead to a relativistic trapdoor that would affirm as many versions of Islam as there are

opinions. Therefore, authentic Islam can only be judged by the normative standards of the Qurʾān and Sunnah.[16]

Another very compelling explanation for the subversion of the Qurʾān as foundational text is proffered by Ismāʿil Rāji al-Fārūqi. Al-Fārūqi attributes the declining influence of the Qurʾānic Ideal to the failure of Arabization maintaining pace with Islamization. As a result,

> the Qurʾānic meanings came to be less and less the object of an intuitive grasp and immediate understanding, and more and more that of a conceptualizing sense-empiricism in doubt about the new message which shattered its old pre-Islamic world-view. Compared with the Arab or fully-Arabized mind, this mind was incapable of fully grasping the idea of transcendence and of appreciating the necessarily-human, necessarily-conceptual and necessarily-aesthetic (poetic) language in which the transcendent may be expressed or talked about. But where the transcendent or the Qurʾānic meanings pertaining thereto are not object of an immediate intuition, they became irrational stumbling blocks.[17]

This blurred, non-Arab consciousness thus fell victim to mediated understandings of key Qurʾānic doctrinal concepts, opening the door for foreign influences – as al-Fārūqi argues – especially from the religions of Persia and India, or from the Jahwasim of those Jews who thought of their God in excessively human terms.

The common factor alluded to by both Rahman and al-Fārūqi is the diminishing influence of the Qurʾān in the Islamic intellectual legacy along the passage of time. This is not to

suggest that the Voice of revelation was at any stage altogether absent, but rather that cultural and intellectual accretions served to effectively muffle it, rendering it rather inarticulate. In light of such multiplicity of influence, Amina Wadud argues that the Islam of the Primary Sources (i.e. the Qur'ān and the Sunnah) along with the intellectual legacy built upon these sources and the cultural specificities of Muslims from diverse backgrounds resulted in extremely complex configurations:

> Between scholars of Islam and Muslim laity, notions of Islam are sometimes haphazardly drawn from all three levels. No distinction is made between the "Islam" defined through cultural nuance and a wide range of Muslim practices.[18]

Wadud therefore rhetorically asks whether "Islam" is what Muslims do, what governments establish, what the intellectual legacy articulated, or what the primary sources imply? This is very much in keeping with Muslim aspirations that have always viewed Islam as an effort to establish a moral community based on the tenets of the Divine Revelation. As one sympathetic voice puts it: "The Muslim moral community is founded on the assumption that the ultimate source of moral knowledge is God and that God has revealed His Will, for the last time, through the Prophet in the [Qur'ān]".[19]

The re-emergence of the Qur'ān as foundational text thus aims at the recovery of the moral knowledge inspired by God. This necessitates inquiring into the status of values or morals in the Qur'ān, and as such, foraying into the field of speculative metaphysics.

3. *The Qur'ān, Speculative Metaphysics and Ethical Ontology*

It has been pointed out in the previous chapter that traditional metaphysics involved exploring the idea of the separate reality as a possible field of inquiry, and that ontology was initially regarded as a branch of metaphysics. Immanuel Kant ushered in a new era in modern philosophy with his critique of metaphysics as a possible field of human inquiry. The entire classical edifice was brought into question when Kant pronounced that "all our knowledge undoubtedly begins with (human) experience".[20] It could thus be fairly straightforwardly concluded that since our sensory experience does not encompass the metaphysical realm, all speculative knowledge about it is impossible. Kant's critique played an integral role in displacing the primacy of ontology in philosophical thought, replacing it with epistemology. Much of the last chapter dealt with reasserting the primacy of ontology. It was argued that in the modern period a crucial shift in the function of metaphysics was effected, resulting in focus being shifted to the essential structure of our thought while still maintaining its primary ontological function by exploring issues of being and existence.[21] I will return to the importance of this development later, but for now we must explore the implications of Kant's critique.

How, then, is one to address extremely compelling metaphysical issues such as God, knowledge, being, freedom, truth, and – of immediate concern to us – ethics? Kant argued that we are able to confront that which is beyond our senses by the use of reason. He thus exhorted the *a priori* nature of the moral law and sought to establish it as a "fact of reason".[22] This is a position that is still partially favored today, but the most recent developments in metaethics show more concern over how to deal with the fact that

'good' has no proper definition as opposed to by what means one may be able to define the 'good'.[23]

It is by no means an exaggeration to contend that developments in the Islamic tradition proceeded in exactly the reverse order. Al-Nashār explicates that because the Qur'ān is a source of guidance to all of humankind it is only natural that it would outline principles for speculation and thought in addition to directives pertaining to practical life.[24] The Qur'ān does address general principles of metaphysics, of which ethical issues are an integral part and as such sufficiently prioritised. Al-Nashār explains that the Qur'ān calls for the recognition of what he refers to as reconcilable and irreconcilable realities; the latter being in reference to (metaphysical) issues lying beyond the scope of the intellect and the former referring to issues within its reach.[25] The Qur'ānic position on the metaphysical realm as a possible field of inquiry is therefore one of categorical denouncement.[26] The entire purpose of revelation is to indeed address metaphysical issues of concern to human existence, which al-Nashār has labeled as irreconcilable realities. If ethical issues could for example be effectively resolved by the intervention of reason – as Kant suggests – then revelation would necessarily be redundant.

As has been alluded to earlier, unfolding trends in Islamic thought resulted in a shift away from the Qur'ānic ethos so completely internalised by the first generation, thereby opening the door to speculative metaphysics. Al-Nashār attributes both internal and external factors to the rise of speculative metaphysics in Islam, regarding the external factors as being of greater influence.[27] We are not as concerned with determining the

precise factors as we are with exploring their effects. Before exploring the effects of metaphysical speculation, a few words need to be said about the nature of Qur'ānic ethics.

Majid Fakhry's seminal study on *Ethical Theories in Islam* provides an in depth analysis of the development of ethical theories within the tradition, and as is to be expected, his point of departure is the Qur'ān. Although he begins from the premise that the Qur'ān and the Sunnah (Prophetic Traditions) embody the original core of the Islamic ethical spirit, he explicitly states that they do not contain any ethical theories in the strict sense.[28] Ethical theories proper only appear formally in the eighth and ninth centuries. Fakhry categorises them under four rubrics, i.e., a) scriptural morality, b) theological theories, c) philosophical theories, and finally d) religious theories. All of these theories, with the exception of the philosophical, are to a greater or lesser extent grounded in the teachings of the Qur'ān and Sunnah. The philosophical theories stem ultimately from the writings of Plato and Aristotle.[29] It is of central importance to recognise that none of these theories can truly be regarded as being exclusively representative of the Qur'ānic ethical imperative since they all developed in response to rather specific contingent influences. Rahman has reminded us earlier of how such influences served to compromise the Qur'ānic ethical imperative.

Taking recourse to the Qur'ān alone, Fakhry explains that

> [t]he predominant moral motif of the [Qur'ān] is undoubtedly the stipulation that the human agent ought to place himself in an appropriate relationship to God or His commandments if he is to satisfy the conditions of uprightness (*birr*) or piety (*taqwa*) or to earn his rightful position in Paradise. However interpreted, this stipulation is grounded in the concept of religious obligation (*taklīf*) and its inevitable prerequisite, obedience (*ṭāʿah*). The violation of this precept results, of course, in the nullification of the right relationship between God, as Lawgiver and Lord, and man, as creature or servant, designated by the [Qur'ān] as disobedience (*al-mʿaṣiyah*) or sin.[30]

The Qur'ānic ethical imperative can therefore be best understood in terms of an intimate, unbreakable bond between Creator and created – whether acknowledged or not – involving certain human obligations, the fulfillment of which results in eternal felicity and bliss and failure eternal damnation.

The Qur'ānic ethos pivots around three fundamental poles outlined and stipulated by means of revelation. These are, a) the nature of right and wrong, b) divine justice and power, and c) moral freedom and responsibility.[31] Fakhry goes into some detail outlining the relevant Qur'ānic verses that deal with these themes. In brief, the Qur'ān advocates that it is the prerogative of God to determine right and wrong, this being in keeping with His attributes of being All-Knowing and All-Powerful. Human beings have however been granted the freedom to adhere to God's commands or to transgress, but are reminded by the Qur'ān that they are ultimately fully accountable for such irresponsibility. Transgression is recompensed by eternal damnation and obedience by eternal bliss, this being in keeping with God's attribute of divine justice.

The various ethical theories that were formulated at later stages can be differentiated and characterised in terms of the positions they advocate vis-à-vis the three fundamental poles. Their conformance to the Qur'ānic ethos is measurable to the extent in which they comply to the exclusive Qur'ānic position outlined above. At this juncture it is extremely important to stress once again that although we are able to distill unequivocal moral positions from the Qur'ān, a well-articulated moral theory is found wanting. Rather, the Qur'ān instills within the interlocutor a clearly identifiable moral psychology that obviates the spelling out of a theory of right and wrong. Moral agency is as such expressed through action, this being the first indication of the ontological status of values in Islam. The way in which the moral mindset is constructed and hence the ethical positions of the Qur'ān affirmed will be discussed in the final section on the Qur'ānic dialogic and the construction of the ideal-self. However, attention must now be turned to outlining the (negative) effects of speculative metaphysics in some detail because once its heretical wing had taken flight there was no way in which it could be pinioned. The only other recourse is to re-affirm the authentic ethical spirit of the Qur'ān, which becomes a quest after moral truth and a perennial exercise in recovery.

From the outline above it is quite apparent that the Qur'ān accords ethical values an ontological status. It is the prerogative of God to determine what is right and wrong and these directives are conveyed by means of obligations, prohibitions and general exhortations concerning human behavior detailed in the Qur'ān. I have argued at some length in the previous chapter that ontology – or a certain mode of being-in-the world – is the only adequate basis for our moral responses. This argument is rigidly upheld by the

Qur'ānic orientation which locates virtue (*birr*) in acts of obedience (*ṭāʿah*) that conform to the Divine Will. But this is not the only level at which the Qur'ān espouses a strictly ontological moral ethic. The very nature of the directives outlined in the Qur'ān are construed by Muslims as an expression of the Divine Will and are therefore accorded an ontological status. While these directives are easily comprehendible by the rational faculties, they are in no way *determined* by them. In other words, the Qur'ānic directives have an essential status, not a derivative one.[i] The Qur'ānic directives are held to be transcendental, ahistorical and immutable and it is tempting to regard them as 'things-in-themselves' known through revelation. While a knowable 'thing-in-itself' is clearly contradictory in Kantian terms, the description is extremely compelling when applied to the Divine Will embodied in the Qur'ān, and thus quite apt.

By denying the possibility of knowing a thing-in-itself Kant affirmed an ontology that cannot transcend the senses and he therefore introduced a moral vision founded on his idea of the categorical imperative. Such a paradigm obviously rejects revelation as a source of morals as it is founded on an ontology that denies the possibility of knowing things in their essences. Kant as such affirmed a mediated conception of reality, which naturally insisted that all moral value be determined by reason. This position has certain parallels with the thought of the Muʿtazilah, who are regarded as the first genuine moralists of Islam. As Fakhry explains, these theologians were concerned with establishing "that the nature of right and wrong can be determined rationally and that it is ultimately independent of the divine prescriptions as laid down in the [Qur'ān]; in short

[i] It must be explicitly stated that this must not in any way be construed as a literalist position. I will go into

they wished to establish that the two moral categories of right and wrong can be known by unaided reason and the ground of their validity can be justified".[32]

The Muʿtazilah theologians deontologised the status of right and wrong by predicating it on actions that are known through intuition, a rational faculty no doubt. They thus assigned morality an epistemic status. Not only does this logic compromise the credibility of revelation, it also opens the door to moral relativism. Fakhry justly points out that none of the Muʿtazilah scholars made so bold as to declare revelation entirely superfluous, but they certainly did open the door for some of the naturalist philosophers of the ninth and tenth centuries, such as Abu Bakr al-Rāzi.[33]

A few modern scholars like Muhammad Abu Zahrah are sympathetic to the circumstances under which the Muʿtazilah formulated their theories. Abu Zahrah contends that they were compelled to take recourse to rational argumentation since they engaged in debate with opponents that did not subscribe to the Islamic tenets of faith.[34] While this may be entirely true, it does not undo the damage inflicted upon the ethical imperative of the Qurʾān. What is equally lamentable is that their disputations directed Islamic thought upon a trajectory that made it difficult to return to the pristine Islam of the primary sources. The ethical rationalism of the Muʿtazilah gave rise in turn to the voluntaristic ethics of the ʾAshʿarite doctors.

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a detailed clarification in the next section on permanence and change.

The quasi-deontological theory of right and wrong of the Muʿtazilite theologians was a response to an earlier deterministic position that held God to be the real author of every action or occurrence in the world, so that voluntary actions are imputed to humans purely metaphorically.[35] In similar vein, the ʾAshʿarite school represents an intricate and extremely well sustained rejoinder to the ethical philosophy adumbrated by the Muʿtazilah, but in the process revived and affirmed some of the earlier deterministic positions refuted by the Muʿtazilah. In this way the Qurʾānic ethical imperative was continually circumvented by the unending infighting and hostilities swaying back and forth between the various sects.

The ʾAshʿarites rejected the Muʿtazilah claim that goodness and badness (being essential characteristics of the action) can be rationally known "on the grounds that the presumption of intuitive certainty in the apprehension of good and evil is contradicted by the disagreement of vast numbers of people on the allegedly certain maxims of morality".[36] Although the ʾAshʿarites presented a strong refutation of the purely rationalistic ethics of the Muʿtazilah and attempted to place ethics in the realm of the divine commandments and prohibitions of the Qurʾān, they were unable to escape the voluntaristic tendencies they inherited from the early determinists.[37]

They therefore ran afoul of the Qurʾānic position on moral freedom and responsibility by insisting that "the human agent is by himself entirely incapable of carrying out any of his own designs, for he lacks the properties of self-sufficiency and independence, which are the genuine marks of efficacy".[38] In addition to robbing the human subject of agency –

which is incidentally the bedrock of accountability in the Qurʾānic worldview – Ibn Ḥazm also accuses them of advocating the *Murjīʾah* position of withholding moral judgement alluded to earlier.[39]

The impact of the ʾAshʿarite school was tremendous and it stood as the dominant voice of Islamic orthodoxy for centuries. The only other critical alternative worth mentioning was that of the Salafi School, with Ibn Taymiyyah as its most eloquent spokesperson. Be that as it may, not even he was immune from the doctrinal accretions he so severely criticised. Abu Zahrah astutely notes that Ibn Taymiyyah could not avoid affirming an anthropomorphic image of the divine that was obviously contradictory to the Qurʾānic conception of an absolutely unique God.[40] The impact of anthropomorphism was alluded to in the last chapter, where it was argued that ontological proximity between the divine and the human is what ultimately led to deification of the self. The deified self obviously does not take recourse to revelation to derive its ethics.

As such, the desire to return to a systematic complex of ethical values based on the moral precepts of the Qurʾān was to remain unfulfilled. This very same desire still occupies the concerns of contemporary scholars like the late Fazlur Rahman, and it is therefore important to ask whether such ontological commitment to the status of values as expressed in the Qurʾān is justifiable in terms of contemporary philosophical discourse. It is to this fundamentally important concern that we must now turn.

It is essential at this juncture to express the Qur'ānic position elaborated upon above in the language of contemporary philosophical discourse. I have thus far argued that the Qur'ān regards moral properties as a non-natural species *sui generis*, so that good and bad – or right and wrong – are categories that are ontological. Unlike the Kantian reliance upon intuition or reason, the only correct way to apprehend these ethical values is through the aid of revelation, more specifically, through Qur'ānic directives that obligate certain actions and prohibit others, be it explicitly stated or even quite possibly strongly implied. This position is hardly given consideration in contemporary metaethics and, as such, must be sufficiently defended. However, before proceeding further, a brief overview of current trends and developments in the field of metaethics is necessary to place things in proper perspective.

The more or less standard methodology in mainstream metaethics today involves the theorist trying to accommodate and explain the common sense elements and characteristics of ordinary moral talk and thought within the scope of larger (meta)physical commitments.[41] These commitments can generally be traced back to post-Kantian influences that finally culminated in two major traditions. The idealist tradition evolved directly out of Kant's philosophy and sought to carry his insights further, while the empiricist tradition denied Kantian epistemology and sought to establish different insights altogether.[42] Current trends stem from these two major traditions, either following one or the other trajectory or combining elements from both.

The idealist tradition developed a non-naturalistic theory of valuation, where it has become possible "to speak critically of an aprioristic realm of being, namely the realm of values".[43] In other words, it "claims ideal self-existence *sui generis* for values".[44] Ethics, from this perspective, still falls within the scope of metaphysics. While this position is remarkably similar to the Qurʾānic one in that moral categories are regarded as being ontological, it differs fundamentally from it by claiming that valuation can be apprehended intuitively. Drawing on the work of Nikolai Hartmann, al-Fārūqi narrows in on the fundamental weakness of this position, pointing out that in this ethical theory

> the realm of values is one where individual members operate under the law of the *bellum omnium contra omnes*; for every individual member is constantly trying to monopolize the field of human vision and rule tyrannically to the exclusion of its brother-members without any chance of reconciliation whatever. The idealist tradition, therefore, which claims ideal self-existence *sui generis* for values, does so for them as an indefinite internally chaotic mass.[45]

This shortcoming glaringly contradicts the idealist claim that (moral) consensus can be reached *a priori*. Al-Fārūqi's criticism is in this sense similar to the ʾAshʿarite critique (mentioned earlier) of the Muʿtazilite assertion that right and wrong can be grasped through reason. Both censures indicate that any *a priori* moral vision remains practically untenable. Because of this fundamental flaw, the idealist ethical outlook is unable to transcend *de facto* moral relativism, as there are potentially as many conceptions of the good as there are rational subjects. Added to this is the tremendous burden of history that has proven the subjective moral bias of human beings over and over again.

The empiricist tradition, on the other hand, ruled out the *a priori* nature of the moral law altogether. The factual character of right and wrong was thus sought either in the psychic faculties of man or in the empirical qualities of things.[46] From this perspective, ethics does not necessarily fall into the realm of metaphysics. Although the empiricist camp encompasses a wide variety of theories (Evolutionary, Marxist, Pragmatist, Humanist, etc.) rich in explanatory detail,

> dependence upon a state of the subject remains in all these theories the essential characteristic of value throughout. That this state is an approbative state, or a state of agreement and harmony, demands in first place that the locus of goodness be within the subject alone.[47]

Because valuation represents one type of empirical cognition and like all empirical truth it cannot be known except through the senses, this theory is best depicted as naturalistic.[48] As such, the obvious conclusion reached by the empiricists was that moral predicates are mere expressions of emotions and thus removed outside the realms of truth and falsehood. Consequently, there can be "no way in which a conscious, deliberate and consistently-held difference in what ought or ought not to be, can be solved or even composed".[49]

The first major problem one therefore faces in the empiricist tradition is its implicit resignation to a moral-relativist position. It must however be acknowledged that thinkers in this tradition sit far more comfortably in this posture than their idealist counterparts who deny moral relativism altogether. Pragmatists like Richard Rorty are happy to

concede to a morality based on communal consensus or an ethics without principles.[50] Other naturalist thinkers may explicitly deny moral relativism, but they do not do so very convincingly.[51] The only way to concede that moral judgement is categorical is to think of moral properties as non-natural and ontological, which implies accepting that 'good', is in some way definable.

This leads directly to the second major problem within the empiricist tradition, which is the denial that 'good' is in anyway definable.[52] The philosopher's task is in a sense reduced to that of semantically analyzing what the subject means to say when he reports his findings of value-quality.[53] As Dreier points out, the only metaphysical option in the face of a definitional dead end would be to accept that moral properties are, amongst other things, a non-natural species *sui generis* and ontologically brute, even if this position is somewhat old fashioned.[54] While this position may not necessarily be in vogue today, it at least does not suffer from incoherence or blatant self-contradiction.

This position is far closer to the Qurʾānic view outlined earlier and it concurs with the major premises expressed by the idealists as well. Consequently, attention must now be turned to exploring the Qurʾānic position in light of the factors just discussed. This is important because the Qurʾānic position has not been explicitly articulated and justified in the language of contemporary metaethics, even if it has been alluded to by the likes of Rahman. A further consideration is that certain elements in contemporary Islamic discourse reflect trends very similar to those in the idealist and empiricist tradition. For example, Ebrahim Moosa suggests that rights are not exclusively metaphysical

constructs, but are products of history.[55] For him rights are embodied in practices and constituted in our linguistic consciousness, something alluded to in the sources of Islamic law and ethics, i.e. the Qurʾān and prophetic traditions. He therefore calls for recognition of the historical and linguistic elements of the canonical texts. Although he remains vague about the metaphysical nature of ethics, his historicist sentiments clearly place him in closer proximity to the empiricist tradition that denies the metaphysical status of ethics and views moral categories in naturalist terms. This contradicts the non-naturalist, ontological character of the moral values expressed in the Qurʾān. Moosa is acutely aware of the implications of his position since he regards any assertion of the idea of a founding or originary text as a statement of "text fundamentalism".[56]

His corrective is to abandon the idea of the foundational text, which can only result in the complete erasure of the Qurʾānic ethical imperative. His despondency is borne out of the realisation that "a canonical text is flexible to our desires and goals".[57] While this is indeed true, he gives no consideration to the believing subject who is just as flexible, able to temper his or her desires in accordance with the moral dictates of the Qurʾān. It has to be stressed that the power of the agent to reject is not enough to invalidate the foundational text. Moosa's position leans heavily in favor of the empiricist tradition – and all that it implies – but does not at the same time reflect a deep understanding of the significance of the Qurʾān as foundational text. It is therefore necessary to articulate the idea of a Qurʾānic ethical imperative as lucidly as possible, so as to facilitate engagement with outside alternatives as well as the plurality of understandings expressed within the Islamic tradition. The two main questions that must be answered in this regard are

whether it can be reasonably argued that moral categories are ontological, and whether revelation is justifiably a source for these *sui generis* categories of right and wrong. Both concerns can be addressed by understanding the nature and construction of social reality. What then, is the ontology of the social? In order to address this question effectively we must once again revisit the crucial shift in the function of metaphysics discussed in the last chapter and briefly alluded to in the opening of this section. I have thus far maintained that even though the current emphasis in metaphysics presses upon the essential structure of our thought, its primary function remains necessarily ontological because it is still concerned with issues of being and existence. Even though we give up the idea of the 'separate reality' as a possible field of inquiry – as Kant suggests – we are still able to maintain our transcendental concerns simply because they are social constructs.

The nature of social reality is such that ontologically subjective constructs can indeed enjoy an epistemically objective status. In other words, transcendental entities like God and a divinely inspired moral code can be justified as ontological categories even though we are unable to experience these entities through our senses. To explain these claims in sufficient detail, we must turn to the work of John Searle, one of the most prominent thinkers in contemporary analytical and language philosophy.

Searle's most recent work is concerned with the realities of our world that we do not confront through our senses, but still compel us to conduct our affairs in a certain way.[58] Although social and institutional realities are predicated on certain beliefs, they are only

able to function causally because we are convinced of the veracity of these beliefs.[59] The existence of God, for example, is not exclusively dependent upon a set of beliefs (even if essentially constitutive of the phenomenon called God) because there has to be broad-based acceptance of these beliefs as well. These beliefs may also in turn be governed by certain constitutive rules. It therefore becomes apparent that there is a complex ontology underlying all of social reality. What, then, is the ontology of the social and the institutional? And how can there be "an objective reality that is what it is only because we think it is what it is?".[60]

Searle argues that much of our worldview depends on our concept of objectivity and the contrast between objective and subjective.[61] For our purposes, it is crucial to stress " an *epistemic* sense of the objective-subjective distinction and an *ontological* sense".[62] In the epistemic sense, Searle explains, "objective" and "subjective" are primarily predicates of judgement. We would thus objectively judge something true or false if it corresponded to a hard fact, but would only be able to express a subjective preference when comparing two works of art, for example. However, in the related ontological sense "objective" and "subjective" are predicates of entities and types of entities, and they ascribe modes of existence.[63] Revelation, in the ontological sense, is subjective because its mode of existence depends on being felt by a subject, a person we usually refer to as a prophet. A mountain, by contrast, is ontologically objective because its existence is independent of any perceiver[ii] or mental state. The relevance of differentiating between epistemic and ontological objectivity is to stress the distinction "between those features that we might

[ii] It is clear from this statement that Searle advocates a commonsense notion of philosophical realism, which he goes on to defend very convincingly in *The Construction of Social Reality*.

call *intrinsic* to nature and those features that exist *relative to the intentionality of observers, users, etc.*".[64] Our main problem is thus "to explain how there can be an epistemically objective social reality that is partly constituted by an ontologically subjective set of attitudes".[65] Searle explains that all of social and institutional reality can be explained by elaborating on three notions, i.e., the assignment of function, collective intentionality, and constitutive rules.[66]

Beginning with the first, we need to note that the capacity of conscious agents to create social facts is dependent on the imposition or the assignment of functions to objects and to other phenomena.[67] These functions are never intrinsic; they are part of a system "where the system is in part defined by *purposes, goals, and values generally*".[68] We may thus think of humans as part of a larger scheme brought into existence by God, where our ultimate purpose is to comply to the Divine Will embodied in the revelations made to the prophets, the last of whom is Muhammad, recipient of the Qur'ān, which serves as a guide for humankind by explicating on right and wrong, or good and bad. It is of central importance to understand that the functional attribution introduces normativity:

> The normativity is a consequence of the fact that the functional attribution situates the causal facts within a teleology. The attribution of function presupposes the notion of purpose, or a goal, or an objective, and thus the attribution ascribes more than just causal relations. These purposes, goals, and objectives exist only relative to human and animal agents [...]. We can summarize the general point by saying that all functions are observer-relative.[69]

Speaking specifically about ethics, Jonathan Jacobs stresses the importance of acknowledging teleological considerations more explicitly.[70] He laments how the teleological element of virtue has been largely replaced by the agent's cognitive engagement with the world. "The philosophical environment is not supportive of notions of an intrinsic end for human nature, or a unified, harmonious conception of human good. For reasons coming from metaphysics and concerning the pluralism and incommensurability of values, it can look like teleology in ethics has been starved out".[71] Jacobs is however adamant that there can be no plausible, adequate notion of virtue free of teleological considerations.[72] This is because humans will always attribute certain functions to their causal relations, as Searle has indicated. For example, Muslims believe that the Qur'ān embodies fixed moral categories of right and wrong, compliance to which is rewarded by God. They as such conduct their affairs in accordance with this attribution. This leads us directly to Searle's second notion, i.e., collective intentionality.

To put it as basically as possible, whenever you have people sharing their thoughts and feelings or cooperating you have collective intentionality. Searle defines a *social fact* as any fact involving two or more agents who have collective intentionality.[73] He further explains that while social facts may involve physical cooperation, *institutional facts* extend way beyond, creating social realities that are founded upon complex webs of belief. The centrality of the Qur'ān in Muslim practice – viewed from this perspective – can thus be understood as an affirmation of the function it has been assigned because it is strongly reflective of collective intentionality.

The nature of the Qur'ān is such that it not only regulates Muslim behavior, but it in many ways also constitutes, or makes possible, the form of behavior it regulates. This is Searle's third and final element that makes sense of social reality. Institutional facts, he argues, can only be fully explained in terms of constitutive rules, because they are only able to exist within systems of such rules.[74] It is therefore crucial at this point to mention the role of language in institutional reality. Searle's ideas on language are informed by the seminal work of his teacher, J. L. Austin.[75] He argues that in institutional reality, language is not used merely to describe the facts but is partly constitutive of the facts.[76] Performative utterances, Searle explains, are those in which saying something makes it true. This applies to all of the ethical and legal injunctions in the Qur'ān, or in any legal or ethical code for that matter. The role of performative utterances is of greater relevance to our final section and will thus be detailed later. Turning to immediate concerns however, this brief elaboration on the nature and construction of social reality should sufficiently enable us to make sense of the ontological nature of moral categories and justify the claim that the source of these moral values are the revelations that constitute the Qur'ān.

All of social reality is constructed in the manner just described and it must therefore be acknowledged that there are always alternatives to any given moral system. Such alternatives are constructed by the assignment of functions that project a very different teleology, affirmed by a given social collective, and governed by its own set of constitutive rules. It is well worth considering the thought of Freidrich Nietzsche as a counter-example in this regard. Nietzsche can justifiably be looked upon as the modern-

day prophet of materialism because he proposed a teleology that expressed ultimate meaning for human beings in self-referential terms. He displaced God as ultimate authority by pronouncing Him dead and filling the vacuum with his Superman, thereby preaching a new atheistic creed that would lead humanity to greatness.[77] In terms of ethics, he consequently rid us of the 'tedious' categories of "good" and "bad" and put in its place "the will to power," which he viewed as an essentially human drive that steers towards self-fulfillment.[78]

How does one then claim preference for one system of ethical beliefs over another, when both are essentially social constructs? The only adequate response other than claiming superiority for one's own beliefs would be to concede that the final arbiter in such cases is always history. The apologist can only strive to understand, interrogate and articulate his or her own beliefs as cogently as possible, thereby extending open invitation to anyone predisposed to responding. Searle has reminded us that the assignment of any function only makes sense in the context of a presupposed teleology. If the purposes, goals or objectives implicit in any system of ethics are no longer venerated, it loses its causal power and is reduced from a living reality to an empty discourse of words. The earlier chapters discussed the disillusionment with modernity and postmodernity and the ensuing critiques of these social and philosophical projects. From the perspective just outlined, this belies a loss of faith in the proposed teleologies projected by these discourses.

I have also pointed out that the displacement of the Qur'ān as foundational text was due to deviation from its expressed teleology, resulting in the dislocation of the Qur'ānic ethical imperative from the ultimate concerns of the Muslim community. This dislocation translated as loss of meaning. Consequently, to speak about the re-emergence of the foundational text in contemporary Islamic discourse – in relation to the dominant global secular paradigm – is to recognise the reassertion of an alternate authentic ideal whose proposed teleology once again holds much promise. The source of values and the ultimate meaning of our existential struggles are once again being sought in the Qur'ān, now that fascination with Enlightenment Reason has been resolutely displaced by sobering disgruntlement. We must thus turn attention to understanding the Qur'ān in relation to the boundaries it has foreordained. The recognition of defining boundaries is absolutely essential because – as has been argued earlier – the identity of the believer as a moral subject is constructed within this framework of ultimate concerns. Therefore, the issue of permanent, fixed, or ahistorical aspects of Islamic discourse in relation to the changing, in-flux, or historical aspects must now be addressed.

4. Permanence and Change

Social evolution has always been effected by problematising the cultural norms specific to any given community. The influences that bring these norms into question and thereby stimulate change may arise from deep introspection within the community, or from outside voices expressing an alternative that finds a place within. This process has led to the complete obliteration of entire civilisations, as has been argued by Arnold Toynbee in his study of history.[79] Islam, as an authentic ideal, has thus far withstood such effacement

because its normative aspects are still very meaningful to Muslims. This does not in any way suggest that these norms have not been brought into question or challenged.

Moosa penetratingly observes that contemporary Muslim thought is suspended between two narratives: the narrative of origins, where memory of a glorious past is powerfully invoked as evidence of the historical truth of this faith-movement, and the narrative of an unfulfilled present wavering in the flux of history.[80] Whereas he chooses to employ the continuous momentum of change to challenge the apparent stability of the narrative of origins, traditional Muslim apologists have taken the opposite extreme by advocating the fixity and eternal validity of the entire classical tradition.[81] Both views do grave injustice to the authentic Islamic ideal. To deny the foundational text on the basis of changing social realities is to unjustifiably trivialise its relevance and to implicitly suggest the obliteration of a very vibrant and meaningful tradition. In contrast, to affirm the eternal validity of the entire classical tradition is equally denigrating because it entraps the Islamic ideal in a discourse of vulgar literalism.

Noel Coulson expresses an explicit understanding of the importance of oscillating between eternally valid standards and the needs of society. Writing about Islamic law, which in an ideal sense would be the embodiment of the Qurʾānic ethical imperative he argues that:

> The needs and aspirations of society cannot be, in Islam, the exclusive determinant of the law; they can legitimately operate only within the bounds of the norms and principles

> irrevocably established by the divine command. And it is precisely the determination of these limits which is the unfinished task of legal modernism.[82]

Apart from recognising the need for boundaries, Coulson also alludes to the importance of determining precisely what these permanent or fixed poles are. Postmodernist discourse has shown a particular distaste for defining boundaries and therefore expresses an acceptance of continuous change and revulsion for permanence and immutability. However, in order for Islam to persist as an authentic ideal it has to maintain its core characteristics and still reflect sensitivity to change. In what follows, I will firstly affirm the permanent axis of Islamic discourse, before going on to outline how the relationship between revelation and reason in the Islamic tradition is able to accommodate the immutable aspects of Islamic discourse in light of ever-changing realities. This will be further elaborated upon by briefly outlining a hermeneutical model that centres on establishing social practices that are informed by divine intent. My discussion in this section is intentionally brief, as I am solely concerned with indicating the ability of Islamic discourse to negotiate changing realities while still claiming permanence and immutability.

I have argued earlier that the Qur'ānic ethical system is founded on ontologically rigid moral categories, but it must now be explicitly stated that it is precisely these ethical norms that represent the permanent axis that acts as the benchmark of authentic Islam in light of ever-changing social realities. This does not imply a literal application of revelation insensitive to contextual or cultural factors nor does it valorise the classical tradition as eternally valid. As Lamido Sanusi points out, any attempt to arrest the

evolution of Islamic law by suspending *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) is to confer on the founders of the schools of law the status of "disembodied" subjects who have asked and answered all questions for all times.[83] He is as such weary of the transcendental subject, immune from history and argues for an "embodied" subject who is influenced, affected and conditioned by history. Citing the Muslim historiographer Ibn Khaldūn, he emphasises the importance of reading scripture in the light of concrete history.

However, he is just as explicit in asserting that any argument that discountenances God as the foundation of knowledge and ethics cannot remain within the ambit of Islamic discourse.[84] In other words, the existence of God as *the* Transcendental Source of being, knowledge and ethics – as is expressed in the Qur'ān – constitutes the defining boundary of the foundational text and is not subject to change. Located within this boundary is the human subject challenged by a world in constant motion. The only vehicle, then, able to traverse the divide between the two poles of permanence and change is *ijtihād* (independent reasoning). This necessarily brings into question the nature of the relationship between reason and revelation in the Islamic tradition. Khan insightfully explains this relationship by arguing that

> In Islam, the principle of *Ijtihād* is the vehicle that employs 'human reason' and 'independent judgement' in order to contextualize the significance of revelation. Through a fusion of reason and revelation 'truth' is made temporally relevant. Thus the ahistorical and acontextual truth – The Truth – which is contained in the Qur'ān, is accessed via reason to articulate 'applicable truths' which are relevant to time and place.[85]

He further argues that the above understanding of the nature of revelation and its relation to reason is the foundational principle of contemporary Islamic discourse. We must as such explore this relationship in some detail, starting by locating it within the broader context of contemporary philosophical discourse.

The concepts of revelation and reason as understood in Islam currently lies partly concealed under the debris created by the tremendous legacies of modernity and postmodernity. The central aim of both revelation and reason has always been the aspiration to truth and knowledge, which are two terms very often expressed synonymously as meaning. Kant, for example, discounted revelation as a source of knowledge and argued in favor of reason, in the process strengthening the hand of modernist discourse. Postmodern discourse not only unseated reason but brought into question the very concept of meaning altogether.

Although modernist discourse finally came to view reason and revelation in mutually exclusive terms, we find that in the Islamic tradition they are intimately linked. While divinely revealed truth defines the existential objectives of humankind, the role of reason is primarily to digest the message of the Qurʾān through intellectual striving and practical implementation. Drawing on the projected teleology of the Qurʾān ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Najār explains that revelation addresses both the existential objectives of humankind as well as the means to fulfill these objectives so that the responsibility of understanding and implementation is entrusted to the faculty of reason.[86] He further adds that the fulfillment of such moral obligation (*taklīf*) is rewarded in the hereafter, whereas failure to comply is

punishable. The final destiny of humankind – from an Islamic perspective – is therefore determined by the successful reconciliation between reason and revelation.

To be expressly clear then, the role of reason is to make sense of revelation so that human beings may fulfill the existential objectives expressed therein. Al-Najār explains that this role necessarily involves two very distinct phases, that of understanding and that of application to any given situation.[87] Stated differently, this role may be seen to extend to theoretical concerns firstly and then to practical considerations. The main function of reason in the first phase of interaction with revelation is to determine "Divine Intent," which then in turn informs human praxis.[88] This leads directly to the second phase, where reason is applied in assessing situational contexts so as to best judge the circumstances and conditions for putting into effect the injunctions derived from revelation. I will return to the practical aspects later but must now elaborate more upon the role of reason in determining the objectives spelt out by God the Lawgiver, what al-Najār describes as "Divine Intent."

As mentioned earlier, the very concept of meaning has been problematised in contemporary philosophical discourse. From this perspective the claim that divine intent can be established from the Qurʾān would certainly be problematic. Literary theorists who reduce the Qurʾān to an immanent text could ostensibly argue that the interlocutor can never really know authorial intent, therefore 'God' could be understood to be saying just about anything. Philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer have questioned the meaning of a literary text and have asked how relevant to this meaning is the author's intention.[89] It is

further argued that even if critics could obtain access to an author's intention this would not necessarily ground the literary text in determinate meaning, because an author's intention is itself a complex 'text' which can be debated, translated and interpreted in many ways.[90] If the Qur'ān were to be approached from this perspective then it could never serve as a stable centre of meaning and would hence lose all significance.

The Qur'ānic theory of meaning is closer to that of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. His theory of meaning is pre-linguistic, i.e., it suggests that meaning is something which the author *wills*.[91] In Qur'ānic terms, then, meaning or truth is equivalent to that which is expressed by God and what we have called divine intent. The fundamental question that thus arises in this regard is how do we then determine the "Divine Intent" (*al-Murād al-'Ilāhi*) or, synonymously, the "objectives of the Lawgiver" (*Maqāṣid al-Shāri'*).[92] This is an issue that has been elaborated upon in immense detail in the Islamic tradition and finds its most eloquent and cogent expression in the work of the Andalusian scholar Abu Isḥāq al-Shāṭibi.[93] His work has impacted upon contemporary Islamic discourse very profoundly and is currently enjoying a very spirited revival. More importantly, his discourse represents a critical alternative to the relativistic theories of meaning just alluded to and although firmly grounded in the traditional Islamic sciences, al-Shāṭibi's ideas are very relevant to contemporary philosophical trends.

Al-Shāṭibi's hermeneutical model for determining divine intent from the Qur'ān relies upon five fundamental components, which we will briefly discuss in order of importance.[94] The *language component* is the first and most important element – upon

which some of the ensuing components also rely – and therefore deserves considerable attention. Since the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic, it must be understood in accordance with the specificities of this language. For al-Shāṭibi, "the Arabic tongue is the Translator of God's intentions".[95] Drawing no doubt on the legacy of his predecessors, he advocates a theory of meaning that is anchored to a particular usage, circumstance, and historical and religious situation, which is pretty much the position of the Andalusian Zahirites.[96] Ibn Ḥazm, the greatest of the Zahirite scholars, in fact directly influenced much of al-Shāṭibi's thought.[97] The name Zahirite derives from the Arabic word for clear, apparent and phenomenal, accurately reflecting the theory of meaning developed by them.[98] Edward Said asserts that much of their polemics anticipate twentieth-century debates between structuralists and generative grammarians and between descriptivists and behaviorists, as these Andalusian linguists directed their energies against tendencies to turn the question of meaning in language into esoteric and allegorical exercises. Said further expresses dismay with the undue emphasis placed in recent critical theory on the limitlessness of interpretation. Inspired by the medieval Arabic linguists, he calls for the constraining of interpretation. He therefore endorses the Zahirite notion of meaning because

> it represents a considerably articulated thesis for dealing with a text as significant form, in which [...] worldliness, circumstantiality, the text's status as an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency, are considered as being incorporated in the text, an infrangible part of its capacity for conveying and producing meaning. This means that a text has a specific situation, placing restraints upon the interpreter and his interpretation not because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery, but rather because the

> situation exists at the same level of surface particularity as the textual object itself. There are many ways for conveying such a situation, but what I want to draw particular attention to here is an ambition (which the Zahirites have to an intense degree) on the part of readers and writers to grasp texts as objects whose interpretation – by virtue of the exactness of their situation in the world – *has already commenced* and are objects already constrained by, and constraining, their interpretation. Such texts can thereafter be construed as having need at most of complementary, as opposed to supplementary, readings.[99]

In the quest for meaning this view of language accommodates both permanence and change because it possesses two seemingly antithetical characteristics: "that of divinely ordained institution, unchanging, immutable, logical, rational, intelligible; and that of an instrument existing as pure contingency, as an institution signifying meanings anchored in specific utterances".[100] It is thus not contradictory to assert that the Qurʾān is able to encompass and express a fixed moral ethic which is relevant to ever-changing contexts.

The second component in al-Shāṭibi's hermeneutic relies on the *commands and prohibitions* expressed in the Qurʾān, viewing these as unambiguous expressions of divine intent.[101] It is in this regard important to consider the differentiation between two very specific textual categories within the Qurʾān made by Muslim scholars. The first category encompasses all statements that are of categorical intent (*Qaṭʿīyah al-Dilālah)*, like those that convey commands and prohibitions. Such texts may be regarded as determinate structures because they are unambiguous and express a very specific meaning. Divine intent is clearly expressed in such texts and comprehension requires minimal mental exertion.[102] The second category encompasses all statements of

speculative intent (*Ẓannīyah al-Dilālah*) and is usually open to more than one interpretation or understanding. Such texts may be regarded as indeterminate structures and considerable mental activity has to be expended to determine divine intent within the broader framework of the Qur'ān in general, paying special attention to linguistic considerations and the explicit objectives derived from statements of categorical intent.[103]

The third component arises out of the second and concerns the fundamental objectives (*al-Maqāṣid al-'Aṣlīyah*) expressed in the Qur'ān as well as contingent objectives (*al-Maqāṣid al-Tabaʿīyah*) necessitated by the fundamentals and making them possible. Al-Shāṭibi regards revelation as a guide to that which is in our best interests in this world. He therefore explains that the Qur'ān emphasises the protection of five fundamentals, these being religion, life, progeny, wealth and the intellect, and that the very purpose of revelation is to establish and safeguard these rights.[104] These fundamental rights represent the very ethos of the Qur'ān and are continuously alluded to in various verses, being derived from the determinate textual structures mentioned above, which serve to act as a framework that restricts free interpretation and prevents any tailspin into what deconstructionists call infinite play. In terms of his hermeneutic model, an understanding of the fundamental objectives of the Lawgiver is essential when trying to establish divine intent from verses that are of speculative intent.

Al-Najār admits that establishing divine intent is not always easy and the extent to which dependence is placed upon reason is determined by the nature of the verses being dealt with, i.e., whether they are categorical or speculative.[105] He however stresses that the

Islamic spirit is oriented towards praxis and therefore such difficulty should not act as a deterrent to fulfilling one's moral obligations, this being the very purpose of existence.

The fourth component in al-Shāṭibi's hermeneutic model is not only interesting but extremely innovative as well and concerns the silence of the Lawgiver (*Sukūt al-Shāriʿ*). He basically argues that if revelation is silent on a matter without there being any justifiable reason for *not* addressing it, than this is indicative of divine intent and to provide religious legitimacy for the matter in question is an innovation. In other words, silence is an expression of disapproval because if the said matter was of importance then revelation would have addressed it. This component of his hermeneutic operates more in the sphere of injunctions pertaining to ritual obligations where innovated acts of worship are strictly frowned upon, as God has not enjoined them.[106]

The fifth and final component of al-Shāṭibi's hermeneutic is *induction*. Although he does not specifically mention induction as part of his model, its importance cannot be ignored as it provides the basis for determining divine intent in all the cases where such intent is not clearly apparent.[107]

It should be apparent that al-Shāṭibi's hermeneutic model clearly oscillates between the poles of permanence and change so as to derive a model for human behavior that is true to divine intent. It is also a model where reason is clearly guided by revelation, but it must at this point also be stressed that the role of reason is not solely confined to the

determination of divine intent. The second phase of contact between revelation and reason strives to give practical expression to the directives distilled from the Qur'ān.

Al-Najār asserts that one of the major shortcomings in Islamic thought throughout its history has been to pay insufficient attention to the role of reason in determining the practical applicability of the directives distilled from the Qur'ān.[108] He warns that to mechanically apply Qur'ānic directives to any given reality without taking into consideration contextual nuances could result in the very subversion of divine intent. An important example in this regard is the suspension of the punishment for theft by 'Umar, the third Caliph, in the year of famine. So while the Qur'ān does indeed express categorical positions on certain matters, this in itself does not obviate sensitivity to context. It is not however being suggested that context is the sole determinant of the applicability of Qur'ānic injunctions. The point is that from a practical perspective certain Qur'ānic injunctions are flexible enough to accommodate contextual considerations while others are not and as such demand submission.[109]

The crux of what has been argued above is that revelation represents a fixed pole, which with the aid of reason, is able to imbue the ethical imperative of the Qur'ān into the very fabric of society, in spite of ever changing social realities. More important than explicitly detailing what is eternal, what is open to change, or what lies in-between, is to recognise that the willingness to act upon the injunctions of the Qur'ān can only arise out of an acceptance of its truth and therefore its authority.

The Qur'ān as foundational text addresses the ultimate concerns of the individual, and because society is no more than the individual multiplied, the Qur'ān is only able to find expression in society if it resonates strongly in the individual. We must therefore shift attention back to the individual and elaborate upon how the intimate reception of the Qur'ān influences the construction of the ideal-self.

5. *The Qur'ān and The Dialogical Self*

All the preceding sections in this chapter have been oriented towards demonstrating the centrality of the Qur'ān in the Muslim psyche, or to put it in more familiar terms, to explain the re-emergence of the Qur'ān as foundational text. It is therefore important to briefly revisit the main arguments that have been expressed thus far. I have earlier asserted that the reception of the Qur'ān by the nascent Muslim community was such that it informed the very purpose of their existence, and is therefore best described as a foundational text. However, various factors contributed to the marginalisation of the Qur'ān and it was in time no longer received as a foundational text, but more as scripture or a holy text. In spite of this mediated status, the Qur'ān still exercised considerable authority over those who believed in it, regarding it as an expression of the Transcendent Will and as such in many aspects immutable, ahistorical, and acontextual. Muslim scholars consequently attempted to develop hermeneutic models that oscillated between a permanent axis and ever-changing social realities to enable living in accordance with divine intent. Nonetheless, it has also been shown that the centrality and authority of the Qur'ān has continuously been challenged, but henceforth from a perspective that has dealt with it as a text, even when conceding its divine status.

In order to appreciate the re-emergence of the Qur'ān as foundational text we need to account for its authoritative nature by looking beyond the strictures that view it as a scriptural text. In what follows, I will therefore demonstrate that the Qur'ān's ability to maintain its relevance and hence authority, is attributable to its communal and performative nature. I will proceed by firstly considering recent attempts to explain and understand the Qur'ān and point out some of the shortcomings of these attempts. I will then present an alternative model that is able to make sense of the Qur'ān as foundational text.

The two most prevalent trends dealing with the study of the Qur'ān today are no doubt the historical-philological approach and the literary approach.[110] While the first approach, pioneered by the likes of John Wansbrough, examines and problematises the historical conditions that gave rise to the Qur'ān, the second approach has explicitly concerned itself with the relationship between the Qur'ān and the generation of meaning. In the context of our inquiry, I will place more emphasis on the second approach because it relates far more directly to the reception of the Qur'ān as a source of meaning. However, the insufficiency of both of these approaches must be noted from the outset. Daniel Madigan alerts us of the need to supplement these two approaches with one that is more sensitive to the study of religious phenomena because the Qur'ān is more than merely an intriguingly problematic text.[111] He warns that exclusive reliance upon these two approaches can only be expected to yield limited results.

Despite Madigan's cautionary advice, many scholars remain extremely enamoured with especially the in vogue literary method. In a recent study on Qur'ān literature Ebrahim Moosa challenges the very notion of stability of meaning, arguing that semiotic processes allow for the "continuous desymbolization and resymbolization of signs and symbols," thus keeping the generation of meaning in flux.[112] Drawing on the legacy of French post-structuralist theorists like Derrida, Lacan and Foucault, Moosa attempts to demonstrate that "the search for meaning resides not so much in our knowledge of literary texts themselves, as in the way they are read and interpreted".[113] In this regard he affirms Foucault's jocose assertion that to know must therefore be to interpret. He consequently also agrees with Mohammed Arkoun that perhaps the revealed text is no more than "an infinite space for the mental projections of all the ideal types of perfect existence towards which believers aspire".[114] In true postmodern form then, it seems that Moosa is able to do away with the text altogether, leaving us only with interpretation.

Apart from the French post-structuralists, he also borrows from the eminent Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, in arguing against the stability or fixity of meaning. While Bakhtin clearly advocates the view that variant meanings are generated through a dialogic process, he in no way advocates a notion of the *instability* of meaning. Therefore, to construe 'dialogism' or 'heteroglossia' as opening the way to total linguistic freedom is certainly a misunderstanding.[115] For Bakhtin a core of stability makes verbal discourse as a system of signs altogether possible.[116] It is around this fixed core that dialogic discourses are generated, giving rise to variant meanings. Moosa even demonstrates how the classical exegete al-Ṭabari systematically refutes variant meanings

when interpreting the Qur'ān. However, his conclusion in this regard leaves cause for concern because in spite of Bakhtin's disclaimer concerning the necessity of a stable core, Moosa concludes that al-Ṭabari forcefully eliminates the dialogue of discourses into a monologue of stabilised meaning.[117] In clear contradiction to what Bakhtin has contended, not only does he disparage the concept of a stable core, but he also suggests that to assert the core meaning is to eliminate the dialogic process.

In similar vein, Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi also emphasise the limitlessness of interpretation by rhetorically asking whether the polysemic and nomadic meanings of a text such as the Qur'ān are able to overcome " the unbewised efforts to reduce it to a monologic decree".[118] They further question whether an "enigmatic text such as the Qur'ān" is able to "function as a poetic touchstone for a universalistic ethics".[119]

There are two major oversights perpetrated by Moosa, Fischer and Abedi. In the first instance, the claim that stability of meaning can justifiably be seen as an elimination of "the dialogue of discourses" and therefore as an imposition of a "monologic decree" is not at all convincing, especially not as a consequence of Bakhtin's thought. I will address this issue in some detail later, but must now turn to the second problem, concerning the limitlessness of interpretation and the 'enigmatic' nature of the Qur'ān.

Madigan very insightfully argues that

> even leaving aside the reductionism of many Western scholars, one must also give full weight to the fact that through many centuries the Qur'ān has seemed univocal and coherent to a substantial community of people; that its meaning, far from being considered 'nomadic', has appeared clearly settled. It is, perhaps, of the nature of scripture that the believing reader seeks to settle on *the* meaning of the text. The fact that others have arrived at different meanings leads the believer to the conclusion not that meaning is nomadic but rather that believers are – sometimes so nomadic that they must be considered as having strayed beyond the bounds of the community of faith[120]

So while the postmodern theorist may deny that the very notions of 'meaning' and 'coherence' have any content, the community of believers continue to engage the Qur'ān as perfectly coherent.[121] Even though Madigan somewhat derisively attributes this to the way in which all scripture is conceived of in general, the fact is that Muslims are still inspired by the Qur'ān in a way that is given expression to in everyday praxis. This only serves to emphasise that it is received in a manner that clearly suggests coherence, in addition to pointing out the severe shortcomings of the literary approach.

A very recent approach developed by Abdulkader Tayob shows far greater sensitivity in dealing with the Qur'ān than the literary approach just described and is worth briefly considering. The outstanding feature of Tayob's approach is that he pays considerable attention to the oral nature, reception, and repetition of the Qur'ān. For Tayob, the Qur'ān is "*the* symbol of the divine irruption into the world within Islam".[122] So being acutely aware of the tremendous significance of Qur'ānic recitation on the occasion of the Friday congregational prayer, Tayob proceeds to analyse its role in the discursive practice

of the sermon itself. He concludes that "every recitation was also a re-citation when the contexts and complex resources of the Qurʾān in society were taken into account".[123] He insightfully distinguishes recitation from re-citation, using the hyphenation to emphasise the spaces and the interference between different recitations. Re-citation thus combines both an interpretation and a performance.[124] Tayob emphatically asserts that:

> This hermeneutical, dialogic nature of the Qurʾān cannot be understated, because the recitation, memorization, and transmission of the Qurʾān was deceptive in the way it appeared to reproduce itself. In the sermon, then, the Qurʾān resonated not only in the numerous quotations from it, although no doubt preachers cited the Qurʾān profusely and drew all kinds of lessons, allegories, and analogies from its chapters and verses. But they did much more than recite when they did so. As they related the Qurʾān to new contexts and new teachings, they re-cited the texts for these contexts. In sermons, preachers literally re-cited the Qurʾān by producing, in form and performance, their own compositions. They not only repeated the first act of revelation from Gabriel to Muhammad but continued it. The sermon was not simply a speech act or admonishment. In terms of the nonverifiable / nonfalsifiable reality that Islam posited as a religion, the sermon was an occasion for divine irruption. It recalled and reproduced, however dimly, the divine irruption in seventh century Arabia.[125]

By examining the multitude of ways in which preachers appropriate and re-cite the Qurʾān during the sermon in response to contingent social events, Tayob concludes that any demarcation between the Qurʾān as closed and the Qurʾān as continued expansion is rent asunder.[126] He thereby seems to suggest that specific contexts play a decisive role in determining the meaning of the Qurʾānic text as "the sermons constituted creative reading of South African historical discourses into Qurʾānic re-citations".[127] While his approach

is unique in its explication of how the Qur'ān comes to life and is made relevant to the challenges of social existence, he makes no attempt to bring into question the mediated understandings arising out of the process of re-citation, or to examine these 'Qur'ānic' pronouncements in light of the fixed ethical imperative of the Qur'ān. In fact, one is left quite uncertain with regards to whether Tayob takes seriously the recognition of a fixed core in the Qur'ān, since he affirms the continuous play between text and context in the generation of meaning far more explicitly.

Although Tayob's approach is not without its problems, it possesses several positive aspects that must be exploited and pushed further. The first is the tremendous emphasis he places upon the oral-aural nature of the Qur'ān, and second, his recognition of the dialogic process in the generation of both meaning and praxis, which consequently stresses the performative nature of the Qur'ān. These aspects will now be elaborated upon in further detail. We must once again re-visit the work of Charles Taylor in order to explore the relationship between the Qur'ān and the dialogical self.

Drawing extensively on Taylor's work, I have argued in the last chapter that identity is constructed in ethical space, that a sense of who we are is defined in terms of what is of ultimate importance to us. This in a way represents the relation between what is perennial and what is ever changing in human life. Taylor thus asserts that although humans always have a sense of self that situates them in ethical space, the terms that define this space, and that situate us within it, vary in striking fashion.[128] Obviously the way that ethical space is negotiated in Islam is what concerns us here, but it is helpful to briefly ponder

over the Western tradition along with Taylor. As he explains, a particular feature of the Western intellectual tradition has been the tendency to see the human agent as primarily a subject of representations: " representations, first, about the world outside; and second, depictions of ends desired or feared. This subject is a monological one".[129] Stated differently, Taylor explains that this view of the self, definable independently of body or other, represents a centre of monological consciousness. This view of the subject is strongly rejected by him and he contemptuously holds it responsible for breeding the various forms of methodological individualism, "including the most recent and virulent variant, the current vogue for rational-choice theory".[130]

Adding his voice to the likes of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Taylor calls for an escape from the "cul-de-sac of monological consciousness".[131] He therefore supports the notion that the agent must be seen, not primarily as the locus of representations, but as engaged in practices, as a being who acts in and on a world. He thus distinguishes between monological and dialogical acts, arguing that from the standpoint of the old [Cartesian] epistemology, all acts were monological even when the agent coordinated his or her acts with others.[132] An integrated, nonindividual agent, by contrast, effects dialogical action, where this kind of action essentially depends on the sharing of agency constituted by a shared understanding by those who make up the common agent, like a political or religious movement for example.[133]

Approaching the question of agency ontologically Taylor asserts that " the importance of dialogical action in human life shows the utter inadequacy of the monological subject of representations which emerges from the epistemological tradition".[134] Explaining further, he argues that we define ourselves partly in terms of what we come to accept as our appropriate place within dialogical actions. For example, in the case where I really identify myself with my deferential attitude towards a higher calling, then this conversational stance becomes a constituent of my identity.

Restating this in terms of the relationship between the human agent and the Qurʾān, it may be said that the subject becomes predisposed to the ethical teachings of the Qurʾān through a process of meaningful dialogue, an engagement with the divine intent expressed in revelation, to which the believer defers and complies, ultimately giving expression to his or her understanding through practical action. This is a fundamental characteristic of the dialogical self because, as Taylor asserts, our understanding resides first of all in our practices.[135] This process is altogether lost to the monological self, the one who approaches the Qurʾān simply as a framework of representations. Taylor is emphatic in arguing that representations are not the primary locus of understanding, "they are just islands in the sea of our unformulated practical grasp on the world".[136]

To reiterate, it may be said that the way in which a person emulates and expresses the ontological blueprint of values embedded within the Qurʾān is a result of the dialogical action outlined by Taylor. As he explains more explicitly: "The self neither preexists all conversation, as in the old monological view; nor does it arise from the introjection of the

interlocutor; but it arises within conversation, because this kind of dialogical action by its very nature marks a place for the new locator who is being inducted into it".[137] In order to fully grasp the dialogical process just described requires an understanding of the Qur'ān that emphasises its oral and aural character.

William Graham is one of the few scholars to have paid any significant attention to the function of the Qur'ān as spoken word. He criticises the fact that the study of religious texts in their function as scriptures has been subordinated to the critical study of their earliest written forms.[138] "The problem this presents is not the linkage of scripture to the written word, but the simplistic understanding of scripture as *only* the written word, only the physical text of the holy writ".[139] The kind of discursive violence inflicted upon the written word is evident even by a cursory glance at the work of postmodern theorists, some of which was elaborated upon earlier, but perhaps the greatest injustice inflicted upon the Qur'ān has been to overlook its inherently dialogical nature. This can only be grasped by recognising the functioning of the Qur'ān as spoken word.

Graham is emphatic that scripture only becomes a useful and meaningful concept for the study of religion when it is understood to be a relational rather than an absolute category or phenomenon.

> A more adequate understanding of scripture has to include an awareness that it refers not simply to a text but always to a text in its relationship to an ongoing tradition, that is, in its relationship to persons and communities of faith for whom it is sacred and normative.[140]

In this regard Graham affirms our earlier distinction between the Qur'ān as scripture and the Qur'ān as foundational text, in the process emphasising the primary importance of the latter to the community of faithful. From this perspective it "refers to a living, active, immediate reality in people's lives rather than merely a completed, transmitted piece of writing".[141] Most importantly for present concerns, he strongly asserts that the most authoritative form of the Qur'ānic text is oral and not written.[142] The active role of the Qur'ān as spoken word is a distinctive mark of the Muslim scripture and this is evident from its role in every day devotional life. Graham as such asserts that the written text is always secondary.[143] This then, is the starting point for understanding the dialogical relationship between the Qur'ān and its interlocutors, especially the role of revelation in the shaping of the Muslim ideal-self.

As Taylor explains, no one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own, but are introduced to them through meaningful exchanges and that is why the genesis of the human mind is not "monological," not something one accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical.[144] For the Muslim such meaningful exchange is effected through his or her reception of the oral Qur'ān. Graham cites the internal evidence of the Qur'ānic text itself to prove the originally oral-aural understanding by pointing to the recurring imperative "Qul!" ("Say!"), which introduces well over three hundred different passages, in addition to the frequently repeated verb *talā*, "to recite, follow,".[145]

In addition to the stylistic expression that reinforces the character of the Qur'ān as the verbatim speech of God, a major portion of the Qur'ānic revelations address the

existential concerns of all human beings, that is, where do we come from, what is our purpose, and what is our final end.[146] As Searle reminded us earlier, any discourse that imposes or assigns certain functions also projects a certain teleology, and in the case of the Qur'ān, this teleology is explicitly stated when addressing the above existential concerns. The believer, by virtue of his or her attestation to faith and submission to the socio-moral injunctions and directives of revelation, accepts the projected teleology of the Qur'ān. It is therefore through this dialogical process whereby revelation addresses the ultimate concerns of its interlocutors that the Muslim ideal-self is constructed. In addition, the process powerfully conveys the communal and performative nature of the Qur'ān as well.

With all of this in mind, the earlier claims made by Moosa, Fischer and Abedi can now be adequately addressed. Simply by understanding the performative nature of the Qur'ān and its power to effect Muslim praxis we are able to see that any claims suggesting that it is not founded upon, or reflective of a stable core of meaning must immediately be dismissed as being patently absurd. Nor is the assertion that the stability of meaning acts as an elimination of "the dialogue of discourses" of any substance either. First of all, not everyone who engages the Qur'ān feels compelled to submit to its authority and neither does the acceptance of its authority result in a monolithic expression of its injunctions. This has been clearly demonstrated by Tayob in his analysis of the Friday sermon and his elaboration on the multiplicity of ways in which the Qur'ān is re-cited. In a sense then, both insiders and outsiders continuously converse with the 'Divine Voice' and the dialogic is never eliminated. What the stable core of meaning does represent is a certain

worldview around which the community is created. Obviously, in order for any community to cohere as a collective, they must be bound by that which is common between them.

This point of commonality brings us directly to the major problematic aspect of Tayob's approach, which must also be addressed now. It concerns the erasure of any demarcation between the Qur'ān as closed and the Qur'ān as continued expansion. Even though he brilliantly illustrates how individual preachers re-cite the same Qur'ān in a multiplicity of ways, he pays too little attention to the way in which the Muslim community is able to cohere as a group, which is a reality reflected even at a global scale. Although certain aspects of the performative Qur'ān may find expression in ways that are not similar or uniform, the majority of the performative Qur'ān is received in a manner that reflects common understanding. This unity of purpose is effected by the common belief in the Qur'ān's projected teleology, which in turn makes aspiring to the same goals and objectives possible, even if mediated by sometimes contradictory, understandings. As long as there are Muslims who strongly believe in God as the Transcendent Source of knowledge and ethics, that the purpose of existence is to fulfill the objectives set by God in the Qur'ān, and that there will be final accountability for all actions in the afterlife, there will always be a community of faithful who are bound together and cohere as a group, in spite of their differences. Only a Qur'ān clearly definable by distinctive boundaries is able to sustain such group cohesion.

The performative nature of the Qur'ān is such that it is able to bring about ontic unity while simultaneously accommodating epistemic variance. This can only be understood once we are able to transcend the strictures that view the Qur'ān simply as a text and acknowledge its status as foundational text. The Qur'ānic ethical imperative, which is at the heart of the foundational text, is the perfect ideal towards which the committed believer continuously strives. In this regard, the Muslim ideal-self is not necessarily an ideal that is unachievable, but simply an ideal that is always under construction. This, in a sense, is what defines the existential struggle of the believer.

6. Conclusion

Current trends in society show a tremendous revival of religion in general. The same revival in Muslim society has been characterised by the call to return to the Qur'ān. As such the pressing need to try and understand how the Qur'ān has – and is – being received by Muslims must be heeded. This is exactly the task that has been undertaken in this chapter.

I began by elaborating upon the early status of the Qur'ān as foundational text and have argued for it to once again be received in a similar manner. This necessitated elaborating upon how such reception could be effected, giving due consideration to trends in contemporary philosophical discourse that are critical as well as accommodating of this endeavor. I have further argued that as long as the existential concerns addressed in the Qur'ān resonate strongly enough amongst those who engage it, there will always be a

stable core around which a community is defined, in addition to a common ethical imperative that is continuously aspired to.

In the conclusion that follows, I will revisit the main arguments presented in the various chapters and attempt to bring into perspective the re-emergence of the foundational text in contemporary Islamic thought.

Endnotes

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CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to examine the way in which the philosophical discourses of modernity and postmodernity have impacted upon contemporary Islamic thought by analyzing the re-emergence of the Qurʾān as foundational text. The centrality of the Qurʾān in the Muslim imagination has always been affirmed, but the ability to translate firm beliefs into living practices that bridge the gap between an imagined ideal and the vagaries of temporal existence has always been a challenge. It is a challenge that has been complicated by the intertwining of opposing ideals and their projected worldviews, all vying for legitimacy, and therefore, a position of centrality within the subjective self. From this perspective, Islam, modernity and postmodernity all represent authentic ideals that stand in opposition to each other. Because Islam represents a marginal discourse in contemporary times, the impact of the dominant discourses of modernity and postmodernity have stimulated deep introspection that has resulted in a clearer articulation of the authentic Islamic ideal. The engagement with modernity and postmodernity has therefore ultimately been positive. It has provoked seeking the justification needed to lend legitimacy to the re-emergent status of the Qurʾān as foundational text, in addition to interrogating the reception of the Qurʾān in the pre-modern era.

The first chapter explored the genesis of modernity in the Western philosophical tradition, emphasising the paradigm shift – or epistemological break – that removed religion as principle and base of identity and replaced it with reason. A similar shift was

not effected in the Islamic context but the mercurial rise of modernist discourse with reason as foundational text successfully displaced other alternatives and placed it in a position of dominance. It was ultimately the moral and socio-political trappings of modernist discourse that led to its rejection and opened the way for other alternatives. The postmodernist alternative advocated wholesale rejection and abandonment of all grand narratives, thereby declaring a virulent form of anti-foundationalism that unnerved the believing subject, even though the major criticisms of modernity were endorsed. Muslim sentiment was too strongly rooted in a worldview inspired by the Qur'ān, which for postmodernists was just another grand narrative. Neither modernity nor postmodernity was able to effect the abandonment of the Islamic worldview, but served the positive consequence of enhancing the intellectual sophistication of Islamic discourse, in addition to inspiring the articulation of the Islamic position in common terms.

By building upon the general critique of modernity and postmodernity deliberated upon in the first chapter, the central aim of the second chapter was to make clear the Islamic alternative. For the Muslim subject, Islam still served as principle and base of identity. It was therefore attempted to explain Islam as an ideal that conceived of authenticity in terms of ontological self-perception. The ontological turn reflected a deeper understanding of the Muslim subject because it recognised the link between the believer's ultimate concerns and the construction of identity. It was argued that Islamic identity, and therefore the Islamic concept of the ideal-self, is informed by the Qur'ān, which addresses the believer's ultimate concerns and thereby provides a basis for human agency. Articulation of the Muslim self-image provided the impetus for comparing and

contrasting it with images of the self emanating from the discourses of modernity and postmodernity.

By extending the descriptions of the various images of the self discussed in chapter two it may be reasonably suggested that the Muslim self-image be referred to as the *submissive self* since it defers to the authority of the Qur'ān, which is regarded as the manifestation of divine-presence. Modernist discourse, in contrast, valorised reason and was able to transcend the authority of the divine by deifying the self. As such, self-presence was manifested over divine-presence. Modernity's ideal self-image is therefore best referred to as the *narcissistic self.* Postmodernity on the other hand – having risen from the discontents of modernity – pays obeisance to the limitations of the subject and consequently lays no claim to any ideal worthy of emulation. It denies the very possibility of presence altogether, thereby giving rise to the *dislocated self.* By relating the issue of presence to the question of authority over the self, the second chapter tried to show that divine-presence acted as a source of meaning and significance, whereas self-presence divested all authority from an external source and places it in the hands of the knowing subject. The postmodernist alternative, which denied presence altogether, challenged the very notion of authority.

What emerges very clearly from the above comparison is that an essential characteristic of the Islamic paradigm is its firm grounding in a conception of the self that strives to submit to the authority of the Qur'ān. Stated differently, Islamic identity is best conceived of in terms of an external or transcendental locus of authority to which the believing

subject strives to submit. By contrast, the dominant Western-secular paradigm – that serves as a conduit for the discourses of modernity and postmodernity – is currently suspended between the authority of the self and a growing scepticism that casts severe doubt over the moral capacity of reason. It is therefore from a position of newfound strength that the third and final chapter approached the role of the Qur'ān as foundational text.

In the third chapter I have argued that to assert the re-emergence of the foundational text in contemporary Islamic discourse, in relation to the dominant secular paradigm, is to recognise the reassertion of an alternate authentic ideal whose proposed teleology once again holds much promise. It also demonstrated that Muslims are once again turning to the Qur'ān as a source of values and as a guide in their existential endeavors. This is very much akin to the way in which the nascent Muslim community had received the Qur'ān, as a foundational text that informed the very purpose of their existence.

This is a position that challenges the dominant narratives within Islamic discourse as well. Whereas the Qur'ān may have indeed informed the grand narratives constructed by the scholars of Kalām, the Islamic philosophers, and the Ṣūfi-Mystics, it was still expressed and conveyed in a mediated form that inadvertently compromised its ethical imperative. Therefore, by re-asserting the foundational text all mediated discourses are effectively circumvented. This exercise in retrieval has been the central occupation of some of the greatest minds in the Islamic tradition, including luminaries like al-Shāṭibi and, more recently, Rahman.

It was further emphasised that the Qur'ān as foundational text transcends the strictures that view it as a scriptural text, which consequently makes little of arguments that strive to undermine it by pointing to the limitlessness of interpretation. The performative and communal nature of the Qur'ān was shown to be able to effect ontic unity while simultaneously accommodating epistemic variance. The foundational text, it was argued, is what defines the existential struggle of the believer because it provides the blueprint for the Muslim ideal-self and therefore an immutable standard that is sought after and emulated immaterial of context and time. The Islamic authentic ideal is oriented towards an ethical ontology, which is a very important departure from the more prevalent atavistic posture that sought to regain the splendor of a distant past. The ideal Muslim-self thus looks to the future, drawing strength, motivation and ultimate meaning from the fixed ethical core expressed in the Qur'ān, while simultaneously being inspired by its vision of the hereafter.

While this study has consciously emphasised the ideal over the lived reality, it is by no means 'idealistic' to now suggest that Islam may in fact represent a genuine alternative to the dominant discourses of modernity and postmodernity. This is simply because the Islamic worldview is being received as a viable alternative to its prevalent secular counterpart. In a very recent study, Adam Seligman gives serious consideration to the possibility that the secularisation thesis has been wrong.[1] He consequently predicts that the further progress of modernity – and even postmodernity – will not be accompanied by the further spread of secular consciousness, but by some sort of return to religious orientations.

This is clearly reflected in Muslim communities all over the world, especially in countries that have enforced the secular worldview upon majority-Muslim populations. None can deny that the Islamic worldview is currently enjoying tremendous revival. It is nonetheless crucial to note that arguing in favor of, or supporting, the re-emergence of the Qurʾān as foundational text should not be construed as an arrogant expression of Islamic triumphalism over the waning secular worldview. This argument is best conceived of as the point of departure for a sustained effort to make sense of the changing realities of a world in constant motion. In this regard, it is hoped that this study may be seen as a step in the right direction.

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